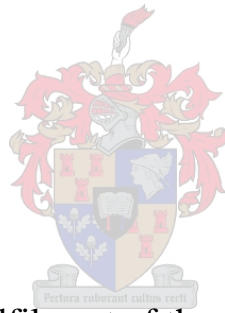


Investigating perceptions of student engagement in class practices of Vietnamese learners of academic English

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Trevor Edmunds

December 2015

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Wow, what a journey. At times I thought that I would never finish but somehow I did.

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Abstract

Over the last 25 years socially-based SLA research has increasingly focused on contextual factors that constitute the local learning environments of learners of English as a second language in attempting to better comprehend the socially embedded nature of learning outcomes. These scholars have largely postulated language learning not only as the acquisition of linguistic knowledge in the abstract but rather as fundamentally constituted by participation in social praxis as situated within local sociocultural and institutional contexts. The emergence of ‘the social’ in SLA research is especially significant to academic contexts in which learners belonging to diverse cultural and literacy traditions typically struggle to identify with target literacy practices of their academic communities. Drawing on a sociocultural approach and the community of practice construct, this thesis takes a qualitative approach. Through the analysis of teacher and student focus group data, this thesis sets out to illustrate learner and teacher articulations surrounding what constitutes learner engagement in an academic English program at an international university in Vietnam. The data collected in this study suggests that the focal learners perceived higher levels of learner engagement in learning contexts in which collaborative, dialogic activity was extensively integrated in the acquisition of target academic literacy practices. While the focal teacher articulations surrounding student engagement also took into account the importance of such collaborative class activity, the teachers did not attribute the same level of importance to it that the focal students did. This study concludes that teachers should extensively use activity frameworks within class that encourage group work in the learning of target academic literacy practices, especially academic reading and writing practices. Even where target practices will ultimately be elaborated and assessed on an individual basis, this study illustrates that collaborative dialogic frameworks seemed to provide students with opportunities to pool linguistic, content, and skills-related resources, thus allowing students to overcome learning difficulties associated with academic literacy practices. Ultimately, such activity frameworks appeared to mediate higher levels of student engagement within class activities, which students linked to more effective and enjoyable learning of academic English.

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List of abbreviations

CA – conversation analysis

COP – community of practice

EAP – English for academic purposes

EFL – English as a foreign language

ESL – English as a second language

NS – native speaker

NNS – non-native speaker

SLA – second language acquisition

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Language learning research has sought to illumine the question of why some language learners in certain contexts apply a range of communicative strategies and coping mechanisms in utilizing the target language in order to get their point across while others do not (McKay and Wong 1999: 578). Similarly, in the context of academic English programs seeking to socialize students into target academic literacy practices, an increasing body of research has sought to better understand why some students in certain contexts successfully apply a range of strategies in becoming more proficient members of their academic communities and within academic literacy practices, while others do not.

Since its inception in the late 1960s, the field of second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) as emergent from Chomskian linguistics has been largely quantitative and experimental in taking the psycholinguistic approach in theorizing how language is learned. The object of the enquiry has been to better understand language learning as a fundamentally mental process consisting of “the acquisition of new linguistic knowledge” (Long 1997: 319); the factors under which a learner of a second language “change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the whole system...as they gradually increase...their L2 knowledge” (Ellis 1997 in Menard-Warwick 2005: 258). While researchers aligned with schools of thought within the psycholinguistic approach have sought to better understand “which learner, linguistic and social factors” impact the cognitive processes of language acquisition, the consensus has been that “social and affective factors [...] are important but rather minor in their impact” on the language acquisition process (Long 1997: 319). Questions pertaining to learner social identity have been largely ignored within SLA research due to the perception that learner identities outside of “native”/ “non-native” “are not deemed to be relevant to the question at hand” of how languages are learned (Gass 1998 in Menard-Warwick 2005: 258). Thus, in summary, mainstream SLA literature has maintained that social and contextual factors are relatively minor in their impact on language learning and has treated the language learner as possessing a flat, ahistorical social identity (Thorne 2005: 393).

However, over the last 25 years a growing body of more socially-based SLA research generated by sociocultural scholars, critical scholars, and poststructuralist scholars has increasingly contested fundamental concepts within the field of SLA. Increasingly scholars have argued that research must take into account the complex nature of learner identity, learner history, complex relationships of power, and institutionally situated discourses that learners are exposed to within sociocultural environments (Norton and Toohey 2011: 414). As researchers have noted, the learning context in which learners are situated deeply shapes the manners in which learners can utilize affordances, which van Lier (2008: 253) defines as “opportunities for learning to the active, participating learner”. Thus, SLA scholars of more socially-based research contend that learning environments, in their capacity to either promote or thwart learner agency, profoundly affect learning outcomes. As Norton and Toohey (2011: 414) point out, the failure to understand learners as culturally and historically situated agents often leads to very erroneous characterizations of learners, including their capacity to learn a language, as well as a failure to understand the choices learners make in relation to language learning objectives.

Sociocultural-based SLA research has sought to better understand learner agency, or variously and synonymously termed as “motivation”, “intentionality”, and “engagement”, among other terminologies, though all pointing to fundamentally the same construct (van Lier 2008: 3). In this thesis I align with van Lier’s (2008: 3) definition of agency as not a “competence (as an individual possession), but rather [...] as [an] action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors.” The sociocultural approach maintains that language learning does not consist of the acquisition of abstract linguistic knowledge to be seamlessly transferred across speaking contexts, but rather as social praxis deeply embedded within the sociocultural environments and communities of practice to which learners belong. Lev Vygotsky (1978: 26) saw language as the most pervasive of all cultural tools in its role of facilitating the internalization of higher order, conceptually based thought. Cultural tools represent the uniquely human capacity to utilize conceptual and semiotic constructs to mediate our relationship to ourselves, with other people and to our social-material environments in which we take part (Lantolf and Thorne 2007: 199). Vygotsky (1978: 163) conceived of learning as fundamentally proceeding from “intermental to intramental”, or, in other words, from social participation in sociocultural practices to cognitive appropriation of cultural tools of human mental functioning. In accounting for the “socially distributed” nature of individual cognition (Wertshc, Tulviste and

Hagstrom 1993: 338), sociocultural scholars hold that agency, or, “learner engagement”, as I will be utilizing in this thesis, is fundamentally socially mediated. In other words, sociocultural theory does not see learner agency, or engagement, as being a personal attribute, due to the contention that the cultural tools that constitute individual cognitive functioning, as well as our salient sociocultural practices, are profoundly influenced by larger society in dialectical relationships (Wertsch et al. 1993: 338).

Scholars working from a sociocultural approach have examined the interplay of learner engagement and learning outcomes, and how they are socially mediated through different social relationships. For example, scholars have examined peer-to-peer interaction (Ohta 2000; Van Lier 2000) and teacher - student interaction (Hall 1995; Anton 2000). In academic socialization studies, sociocultural scholars have examined the manners in which social relationships within learners’ academic communities, and in particular the positionality of learners within their communities, have significant sway in encouraging, or impoverishing, learner engagement within target practices as well as the construction of learner identity as competent community members (Duff 2002; Leki 2006; Morita 2004). Furthermore, scholars drawing on sociocultural theory together with poststructuralist theories have sought to better understand how language learning can often entail the bid on the part of learners for increased socio-economic opportunities arising out of the acquisition of what Bourdieu (1977: 646) refers to as “symbolic capital”, which can be defined as forms of knowledge, discourse and other intangible resources that are recognized in a given culture and lead to greater access to desirable social networks, institutional power, and ultimately material capital (Norton and Toohey 2011: 420). Building on the metaphor of capital, Norton (formally Norton-Pierce) (1995: 17) argues that very often language learners “invest” in a target language with the awareness that proficiency represents a symbolic resource which will provide access to their target social or professional communities, ultimately leading to the construction of more desirable social identities. In summary, the more socially-oriented SLA theories see learner agency, or engagement, as a highly local and situated construct contingent upon a broad array of social factors embedded within target practices. Consequently, from these more social perspectives, learning outcomes are seen as highly contingent on social factors of the learning environments in which learners participate.

1.2 Problem statement

In this thesis I will attempt to give voice to student and teacher perspectives surrounding student engagement in class practices within an academic English program at an international university located in Vietnam. Within the university in which this research was conducted, the academic English department and various other academic departments have identified a lack of academic engagement amongst student cohorts. Accordingly, the university has made it an objective to increase student engagement through a range of initiatives, including encouraging academic staff to carry out research. Therefore this thesis seeks to inform teaching pedagogy in order to address the problem of a lack of student engagement at the university. In this thesis I take the stance that student engagement within their academic communities of practice is significantly mediated through classroom activity; specifically, as Lantolf and Genung (2002: 176) have articulated, the “quality of the social framework and the activity carried out within that framework”. In examining academic socialization research, Duff (2010: 176) notes that students’ experiences with their academic communities are co-constructed through social relationships and by the nature of their negotiated participation within class practices. This thesis is significant in that it seeks to contribute to the theoretical research gap surrounding learner engagement in academic contexts in Vietnam. To my knowledge, no studies have addressed student engagement within academic literacy practices in an international university context in Vietnam.

Research question 1:

How does a small cohort of Vietnamese students at an international university located in Vietnam, articulate student engagement within class practices in their academic English program?

Hypothesis 1:

Vietnamese students view engagement as contingent upon (1) the quality of the social framework co-constructed by the class teacher and peer participants, and (2) the personal meaning students attach to English proficiency as a symbolic resource within Vietnam’s rapidly modernizing economy.

Research question 2:

How does a small cohort of instructors of academic English at an international university in Vietnam, articulate student engagement in class practices in an academic English program?

Hypothesis 2:

Academic English instructors view student engagement as primarily contingent upon (1) views that students are either motivated or not, ‘motivation’ here being seen as an individual characteristic that students possess, or not, and, more peripherally, (2) student perceptions of English as a symbolic resource.

1.3 Methodology

In this thesis I will take a qualitative approach in attempting to better understand the perceptions of a small focus group cohort of student participants in line with SLA research that focuses on learners’ voices (Norton and Toohey 2011: 427). I will conduct semi-structured focus group interviews, one consisting of students and another consisting of teachers, with each group comprising between 5-6 participants. There will be one interview session per focus group lasting approximately one hour. Viewing “the interview as social practice” and a collaborative achievement between interviewer and interview participants (Talmy 2010: 2), I will elicit student perspectives surrounding what factors enhance, or contrarily, impoverish, student engagement in class practices in an international university academic English program. The interview as social practice approach to data collection takes into consideration not only the *whats*, or the content of the interview data, but also the *hows*, or the discursive co-construction of the talk data. I feel that examining both student perceptions of student engagement within academic English class practices, as well as teacher perspectives of student engagement, will provide a fruitful point of comparison. In this manner, my research is exploratory in nature and will provide a basis on which more research can be conducted in the future.

1.4 Thesis organization

This thesis consists of seven chapters in total. In Chapter 2 I present a review of the literature surrounding my theoretical constructs: firstly, sociocultural theory of mind as developed by Lev Vygotsky and his contemporaries, followed by the sociocultural approach to SLA as both a theoretical tool and teaching praxis. Continuing the literature review in Chapter 3, firstly I will discuss the community of practice construct (COP), followed by more recent SLA research on learner social identity, and finally I will present case studies illustrating learner engagement within various academic contexts. In Chapter 4 I will present the study design. This will be followed by an analysis and discussion of my focus group data in Chapters 5 and 6. Finally, in Chapter 7 I will conclude with a brief summary of my findings, as well as commenting on the limitations of the study and future research directions.

Chapter 2: The sociocultural approach

2.1 Trends in SLA: The emergence of ‘the social’ in SLA

Until relatively recent times, the theoretical underpinnings governing much of the corpus of ‘mainstream’ psycholinguistic research have given center-stage to cognitive-based theories in explaining a myriad of constructs surrounding language acquisition (Firth and Wagner 1997: 288). Cognitive theories of language learning are premised on the fundamental assumption of psycholinguistics that language exists as an independent system apart from its use as social practice (Toohey 2000: 9). This fundamental dichotomy that views language as an autonomous system apart from its use as social practice has been traced by scholars from linguistic and social fields to Swiss linguist and philologist, Ferdinand de Saussure’s, dichotomy of ‘langue’ vs. ‘parole’, or language vs. its socially situated use (Bourdieu 1977: 647). De Saussure sought to systematically study language, ‘langue’, as “a reality existing independently of its study and free from human thoughts, intentions and feelings” (Dunn and Lantolf in Day 2002: 9) and regarded ‘parole’, or language use as social practice, as ill-suited to scientific enquiry. As Day (2002: 9) notes, this dichotomy of ‘langue’/ ‘parole’ also resulted in prioritization in the field of SLA of the synchronic, or current, study of language, over the diachronic, or historical situatedness of language knowledge and its usage.

In the 1960s and 1970s, influence from the fields of psychology and psycholinguistics had a significant impact on SLA research, as did the work of theoretical linguist, Noam Chomsky. Chomsky (1965 cited in Day: 9) theorized about “universal grammar”, or the innate internal linguistic mechanism within humans, as well as the relationship between the linguistic knowledge an “ideal speaker” possesses and his or her subsequent language production. These influences were pivotal in establishing the dominance within the field of SLA of (1) the conceptualization of language as an independent, autonomous system governed by rules, and (2) the notion of language learning as constitutive of a mostly individual interior psychological process (Toohey 2000: 5). Consequently, one major strand of research within the psycholinguistic tradition has sought to uncover the subconscious mechanisms that occur in language learning; for example, the cognitive mechanisms by which language learners gradually come to internalize emergent knowledge surrounding linguistic rules (Duleya et al. in Toohey 2000: 7). A second major strand of research has attempted to identify specific traits or characteristics of ‘successful’ language learners. For

example, in the seminal book, *The good language learner*, Naiman et al (1978: 5) identified mental strategies (“perceiving, analysing, classifying, storage, receiving, and creating a linguistic output”) and sought to link their usage and relevance to individual characteristics (motivation, personality types, learning styles) in order to shed light on how the relationship between these categories lead to the achievement of language learning outcomes. The authors contended that individual characteristics are *possessed* and that good learners had distinct characteristics and strategies when compared to unsuccessful learners.

All such research ultimately posits language as autonomous systems existing apart from social reality and thus language learning as ultimately an interior process occurring within the learner. Furthermore, the identity of the language learner in the corpus of traditional psycholinguistic literature is representationally flat, often limited to the category of “non-native speaker” (Thorne 2005: 393). This reductivist tendency, argues Gass (in Menard-Warwick 2005: 258), has been considered as essential to the scientific endeavor of eliminating all extraneous variables and arriving at the exact cognitive mechanisms by which language acquisition occurs. Hence, such conceptualizations have led to the popularization within SLA literature of computational metaphors of “language as conduit”, and language learning as constituting the “filling a box [the brains of learners]” with linguistic input to be packed and unpacked (Day 2002: 8).

However, beginning in the 1980s and gaining momentum in the 1990s, there was growing criticism within the field of SLA that such presuppositions governing research methodology and the subsequent construction of language acquisition theory largely ignore the heterogeneous social realities in which humans exist. Specifically, more socially-oriented scholars argue that the SLA mainstream has largely ignored the bridge that exists between cognitive development and the social, cultural, political and historical realities that language learners populate. Although cognitive theorists have acknowledged that language learners do not live, learn and communicate in culturally homogenous environments, increasingly SLA researchers have argued that the social nature of language use and its relationship to language learning remains under-theorized.

Although the 1980s saw increasing attention given to the learner and learning contexts seen in the “interactionist” strand of SLA research (Krashen, Savielle-Troike, and Swain), only more recently has there been a marked shift towards the social situatedness of language learning, and of the language learner, in SLA research (Toohey 2000: 9). A range of fields

have contributed to a lively debate surrounding the social nature of language learning. Cultural scholar Stuart Hall's (in Toohey 2000: 8) seminal piece challenged the notion of feminine gender roles, arguing that identity is never existing independent of culture and history but rather a social positioning.

In the same vein, critical pedagogues and feminist poststructural theorists (Norton 1995; Toohey 2000; Norton and Toohey 2011; Menard-Warwick 2007) have examined the manners in which often seen disparities of power relations within institutional settings position learners. Critical sociolinguists Firth and Wagner (1997: 286) argue that there has been a systemic bias in the field in favor of "cognitive-oriented theories and methodologies" and calls for "a more critical discussion of ... [predominant] presuppositions, methods, and fundamental (and implicitly accepted) concepts" within SLA. Firth and Wagner (1997: 286) called for methodology and theory based on "an increased emic (i.e., participant-relevant) sensitivity towards fundamental concepts" and for a shift in perception of learners as "participant/language user in social interaction" as opposed to 'non-native' (and inherently communicatively deficient). Finally the work of sociocultural theorists, continuing the line of work of Russian educational psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, has been highly influential in examining the cognitive/linguistic development of language learners in relation to the quality of the social framework in which students participate. All of these researchers have read the work of Vygotsky and Russian literary scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin (Toohey 2000: 7). Similarly the work of sociologists Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave and, specifically, their construct of the community of practice (COP), has also been highly influential in more socially oriented SLA research. All of these strands of research reject the distinction made between 'langue' and 'parole', the view that language can be separated from its use. Such views are grounded in the view that language knowledge and its use are dialogically constructed due to the view that language is fundamentally a social practice. In the proceeding section I will go into greater detail in characterizing both sociocultural theory and the COP as my primary theoretical constructs used in this thesis.

2.2 Sociocultural theory: an overview

The purpose of this section is to give a sufficient description of the foundational principles of sociocultural theory before proceeding to discuss how sociocultural theory is practiced in SLA as both a research methodology and pedagogical practice. Sociocultural theory is a

theory of mind that has been extensively drawn on to explain human mental functioning and, in particular, the human developmental processes involved in learning. Despite the terminology of ‘socio’ and ‘cultural’, the theory does not refer to “cultural aspects of human existence...[but rather]... recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking.” (Thorne 2005: 393). As the body of sociocultural theory research has grown in the fields of psychology, educational psychology, and different fields of applied linguistics, different schools of thought have arisen. For example, within SLA the work aligned with Vygotsky’s contemporary, Leont’ev, has been termed “activity theory”. However, for the sake of clarity, I will use the term sociocultural theory, or the sociocultural approach to SLA, throughout this thesis, terms that are commonly utilized in various fields of applied linguistics. As Thorne (2005: 394) notes, all schools of thought within the sociocultural field would agree with Wertsch (1995) that “the goal of [such] research is to understand the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional settings, on the other”. To this end, sociocultural theory offers a robust approach in its theoretical underpinning that seeks to join the dimensions of the cognitive with the social aspects involved in language acquisition. Sociocultural theory is considered both a branch of psycholinguistics, in its theorization of human cognitive development, as well as belonging to the field of critical applied linguistics in its foregrounding of social and political aspects of learning within institutional settings. Sociocultural theory places emphasis on using research processes and findings to enact positive transformation in problem situations (Engestrom, Engestrom, and Kerosuo, 2003 in Thorne 2005: 394). Vygotsky advocated for social justice through the institution of education, which he viewed as a potentially powerful kind of intervention for the transformation of society through the transformation of everyday mundane practices within cultural institutions.

Before getting further into a description of sociocultural theory it is important to note that there has been some confusion surrounding the use of the term ‘sociocultural theory’ within the field of SLA. Some researchers have used the terminology to refer to an array of theories that examine salient social and cultural institutions and practices in their role on language learning. Poststructuralist theorists, for example Norton and Toohey (2011) and Gao, Cheng and Kelly (2008), use the term “sociocultural theories” in reference to the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues, as well as to that of Lave and Wenger’s construct of the community of practice (COP). In this thesis, I will use the term sociocultural theory to refer exclusively to

the theory of mind and human development as formulated by Vygotsky and his colleagues. In the second part of this chapter, I will examine Lave and Wenger's construct of the COP as a very complementary, but nonetheless, separate theoretical construct from sociocultural theory.

Sociocultural theory was the result of Vygotsky's efforts to produce a "unified theory of human mental functioning" thus bringing together the two dominant schools of psychology at the time, which were the school of psychoanalytics representing Freudian psychology, on the one hand, and the schools of Gestaltian theories representing surface psychology, on the other (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 142). Vygotsky argued that a qualified understanding of human psychological development required a nuanced understanding of culture, history, human feeling and expressiveness; that while understanding the role of autonomous neurobiological functioning was crucial to understanding human cognitive development, it alone could not account for the complexity of human development (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 142). With the help of his colleagues, AN Leont'ev and AR Luria, Vygotsky was able to establish the sociocultural theory of mind, which emphasizes the study of "real individuals rather than idealized abstractions", whose approach is rooted in the hermeneutic tradition more so than the traditional experimental approach (ibid). The hermeneutic tradition, also known as the "romantic science", is fundamentally oriented towards the description of "human experience as concretely as possible, and therefore to emphasize variety, differences, change, motives and goals, individuality rather than uniformity...or unfaltering repetitive patterns" (Berlin in Pavlenko and Lantolf 2001: 142). It is this tradition that directly or indirectly affected Vygotsky's project of finding a theory of unified psychology following the Russian Revolution.

2.2.1 Learning by mediation

While Vygotsky acknowledged the centrality of mental functioning as a product of neurobiological functioning, he argued that it alone could not account for the complexity of human behavior. For Vygotsky, the distinguishing dimension of human consciousness was the capacity for humans to voluntarily mediate such neurobiological processes through the use of "cultural tools" (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 198). Sociocultural theory holds that cognitive development occurs through participation in social interactions that people have

with other individuals and through the mediation of cultural tools (Vygotsky 1978), also referred to as “symbolic tools”, “cultural artifacts”, or simply “artifacts” (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 198). Just as physical tools are directed externally and used to shape and transform physical landscapes, so symbolic tools are inwardly directed in order to organize higher-order psychological functioning. Cultural, or symbolic, tools can thus be defined as culturally-defined concepts, frameworks, or signs that are fundamental to the regulation of biologically-endowed psychological processes (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 199). They are semiotic in nature and allow humans to regulate themselves as well as interact within their social-material worlds. Examples of symbolic tools include systems of numeracy, literacy, categorization, rationality, logic and language. Such cultural tools are historic and culturally situated and passed down through successive generations. The use of symbolic tools is voluntary and thus allows for the intentional delay of the biological response to stimuli as opposed to automatic reactions, and consequently allows for planned responses (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 203). The use of symbolic tools allows humans to utilize conjecture on an ideal plane prior to acting on the concrete objective plane and thus serve as “buffer[s] between the person and the environment and act to mediate the relationship between the individual and the social-material world.” (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 199) Of all such symbolic tools, Vygotsky considered language as the most prevalent and dynamic: Language pervades all other semiotic tools and is the basis by which participation in socio-culturally significant activity occurs. It is through language, argued Vygotsky, that the learning of all other culturally salient mediational means is made possible.

Vygotsky viewed learning as constitutive of participation in any and all socio-culturally important activities across a range of social and institutional settings. It is the participation in such activities, Vygotsky argued, that allow children to initially gain exposure to culturally salient symbolic tools of mediation, subsequently internalize and ultimately have the freedom to transform such tools as necessary. Vygotsky’s (1978) conceptualization of how social participation and psychological development cannot be meaningfully analyzed independently of one another is illustrated below:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. . . . It goes without

saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (Vygotsky 1978: 163)

Internalization, argued Vygotsky, is a negotiated process, which "accounts for the organic connection between social communication and mental activity and is the mechanism through which we gain control over our brains, the biological organ of thinking" (Yaroshevsky in Lantolf and Thorne 2007: 203). Internalization, according to sociocultural theory, is achieved through social collaboration and through imitation, defined here not as "mindless mimicking" as per behavioral psychology, but rather "involves goal directed cognitive activity that can result in transformations of the original model" (Lantolf and Thorne 2007: 203).

2.2.2 Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky argued that in order for cultural artifacts to successfully mediate higher order mental functioning, they had to engage the individual or group of individuals' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lantolf 2006: 80). The ZPD measures "what individuals can achieve with assistance, or additional mediation", as opposed to what they can do without such help on their own. This additional mediation can be in the form of someone else's guidance, a material artifact such as pen and paper, or through the learner's internal or external private speech. Vygotsky considered the immediate trajectory as well as the future learning potential of learner's capabilities evident in a learner's mediated performance, while unassisted performance was considered as indicative of learner history. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the ZPD to any great extent, it is of interest to note that the nature of the social framework in which a learner is situated shapes the manners in which a learner's ZPD is engaged. This in turn has profound effects on the extent to which the learner can and will invest in learning. As this thesis gets into the social situatedness of learner agency, it will become clear that learner agency is conditioned by the extent to which mediational means interact with the learner's ZPD.

2.3 The sociocultural approach to SLA

In this section I briefly discuss the fundamental assumptions of the sociocultural approach to SLA. Such a discussion allows for a meaningful discussion of learner agency in the context of exploring the research question pertaining to learner engagement in class practices.

Mainstream SLA research has framed linguistic knowledge as being composed of knowledge of the separate constituting systems: phonological, morphological, lexical and pragmatic. Traditionally, in SLA these systems have been treated and assumed to be context free, even though in SLA practice they are often in conjunction with communicative activities (Hall 1997: 302). The fundamental assumption, however, is that the various linguistic systems are isolable and that competent language learners come to seamlessly transfer their use from one communicative context to another. However, the sociocultural approach sees knowledge of linguistic systems as inseparable from the contexts in which communication occurs.

As discussed in preceding sections, sociocultural research aims to fully appreciate the manners in which participation in specific activities leads to the formation of culturally-relevant concepts pertinent to higher order thought processes and thereby constitutes the “content of the mind” (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 144). From this vantage point, the social environment is not seen as merely the context in which cognitive development occurs, but rather as the source of mind, itself. In terms of language acquisition, this points to the dimensions of the social and the psychological as not existing independent of one another as polarities but rather as interdependent and mutually constitutive of the learning process. In order to gain an understanding of how concrete learning contexts, including practices and social frameworks, construct learning engagement and learning outcomes, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 144) note that sociocultural research prioritizes questions that are instrumental to micro-analysis of concrete, local learning contexts. These questions include the following: what activity is the learner involved in; how is the activity being carried out (in relationship to other persons, artifacts, etc.); where is the person acting (the institutional or social setting); why is the person acting (their motives); and when is the person acting (due to the observation that the same people may carry out the same activity in distinct ways at different points of time).

In summarizing the fundamental assumptions of the sociocultural approach to SLA research, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 143) draw on Daydov (1999), Engestrom (1987, 1999), Leont'ev (1978, 1981), Wertsch (1998), and Zinchenko (1995, 1996):

1. The formation and functioning of the human mind is the result of human interaction within a culturally framed environment.
2. The cultural environment is as consequential as biological, physical or chemical properties.
3. All activity is motivated by needs (emotional, physical and social) and constitutes socioculturally designed methods for fulfilling such needs.
4. Through participation in external activity, mental processes emerge in relation to the particular artifacts made available by a specific culture in historical time (for example, narratives, signs, words, and metaphors); these artifacts are both material and semiotic in nature; appropriation occurs through internalization: as the use of cultural artifacts increasingly becomes personalized, creative transformation of the activity, and cultural artifacts, themselves, becomes possible.
5. Culturally constructed artifacts and salient discourses, through internalization, serve as powerful forms of mediation that mold people's thinking, behavior and speech. Culturally constructed artifacts are historically constituted and involve the integration of cognitive and biological functioning. Ultimately the cultural artifact becomes internalized to the point of becoming a “functional organ”, and fundamentally inseparable from the person (Luria 1973, 1979 in Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 145).
6. A historical awareness of how certain fundamental cultural artifacts came into existence is required in order to fully appreciate and understand the person and the practice he or she is involved in.

Luria's “functional organ” refers to the fully internalized and appropriated cultural artifact. From this perspective, acquiring proficiency in a target language is “about forming a composite functional organ of person-artifact in which one can no longer determine where the person ends and the tool begins and vice versa.” (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 145) Such a view of language learning points to a high degree of sociolinguistic competence which is seen as emerging from extensive inculcation and internalization of culturally relevant

practices in which the target language is the central mediational means of interaction within a particular community. For the sake of clarity, it is helpful to recall Vygotsky's conceptualization of what it means to learn language. The internalization of language as a mediational means or cultural artifact is to go from imitation of the language to autonomous and creative use of the language. Consequently the language becomes a "functional organ" by which the speaker is able to regulate to a considerable extent him or herself and others within cultural, material and institutional environments in which the language is historically situated.

Hall (1997: 303) articulates this position in her seminal piece in which she contests the psycholinguistic characterization of linguistic knowledge as constituted of knowledge of linguistic subsystems in the abstract. Taking a sociocultural stance, Hall (1997: 303) equates linguistic knowledge with competence in "culturally framed and discursively patterned communicative activities of importance to our groups howsoever these groups are defined" based on the "symbolic tools and resources around which our practices are organized". In this view linguistic competence shifts from abstract knowledge of the linguistic subsystems (morphological, phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatics), as seen in mainstream psycholinguistic research, to knowledge of and the capacity to creatively use a range of communicative resources involved in culturally salient communicative practices (Snow (1991); Vygotsky (1978); Wertsch (1991) in Hall 1997: 303). I now refer to Hall's (1997) discussion of the three fundamental assumptions surrounding language learning according to sociocultural approach to SLA, for they do well in elaborating on the six principles discussed above.

Firstly, sociocultural theory sees linguistic competence as primarily indicated by the language user's pragmatic or sociolinguistic competence in the context of salient sociocultural practices (Hall 1997: 302). Participation in these practices is mediated by the interaction between a range of historically constructed and socially situated symbolic tools and resources which are tied to their historic, cultural and institutionally defined settings (Hall 1997: 302). At the linguistic level, communicative regularities that emerge from repeated exposure become interactional resources comprising salient rhetorical scripts surrounding practical speech acts, turn taking procedures, and other "linguistic and interactional means by which opening, transition and closing is achieved" (ibid). Extensive participation in such practices and the resulting sociocultural competence forms the basis of the participant's mental functioning: appropriation and subsequent control over such practices give rise to

fundamental functions of logic, memory, motivation, and the construction of knowledge. Furthermore, extensive participation allows participants to develop "frameworks of expectations" surrounding how knowledge is jointly constructed, construed and communicated within cultural settings, as well as participants' roles and responsibilities (ibid).

One significant consequence of defining linguistic competence as fundamentally a communicative competence within sociocultural practices of the target community is that the focus of analysis within SLA research becomes the agentive language learner and the activity in which the learner participates, as opposed to target linguistic input (van Lier 2000: 253). For it is the "newborn unity of perception [of the individual (TE)], speech and action" that "constitutes the real and vital object of analysis" (Vygotsky and Luria in van Lier 2000: 253). As van Lier (2000: 253) notes in characterizing the situatedness of language as practice, learners do not come to "have or possess language" but rather "learn [how] to use it and live in it".

A second fundamental assumption of sociocultural theory in SLA is that learning a target language arises out of the social relationships we form through participation in communicative practices (Hall 1997: 302). As Vygotsky (1978: 57) most notably contended, activity at the social dimension precedes development at the cognitive level: "from intermental to intramental activity". This process is framed within participation with more seasoned interlocutors who guide participation in the activity, gradually allotting more autonomy and responsibility to the novice until proficiency is attained (Hall 1997: 302). With extensive exposure, novice participants learn how to anticipate likely sequences of reactions arising out of the activities, the consequences of their participation, and the cultural significance that various elements of the activity (ibid). In this learning process, social collaboration and creative discursive agency within community practices carry a powerful potential to transform into individual psychological tools of personal mediation. Thus, social relationships form the basis by which the acquisition of focal practices and their constituting mediational means, or cultural tools, of which language is the most vital, occurs.

A third fundamental assumption is that cognitive development (including the type inherent in second language acquisition), can best be understood by understanding the cultural contexts and activities in which the various forms of psychological functioning arise (Hall 1997:

304). In other words, in order to understand language learners and their language learning processes, analysis of their “sociocultural worlds” populated by relevant ideas, constructs, and tools, is necessary (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 144). As discussed in previous sections, growing interest within the field of SLA and applied linguistics surrounding the socially situated nature of learning represents a departure from the cognitive revolution of the 1960’s. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Bakhtin’s dialogical view, and various ecological views of SLA all represent the “contextual or situative end of the spectrum”, although they still acknowledge that cognitive processes are central (van Lier 2000: 254). Scholars within these various fields see learning outcomes not as only located within learning contexts, but fundamentally co-constructed by learning contexts.

2.3.1 Language learning as socially mediated

A growing body of sociocultural research in SLA has focused on the role of social interaction in classroom settings in language learning processes. As discussed in previous sections, the sociocultural perspective views language learning as a mediated process, in which the learner operates within his or her social-material environments comprised of cultural artifacts and relationships with other members of the community. The central Vygotskian concept applied to the SLA context contends that target L2 language structures appear on the interpsychological plane, or as occurring through social interaction, prior to becoming appropriated at the cognitive or intrapsychological plane. Consequently, sociocultural researchers have increasingly focused on the manners in which social interaction mediate L2 learning. Van Lier (2000: 253) notes that language learners working collaboratively in pairs and groups can effectively utilize affordances, which are defined as “opportunities for learning to the active, participating learner”.

Ohta (2000) illustrates how learner-to-learner collaboration constructed affordances; specifically, peer-to-peer interaction in the study successfully scaffolded learners into higher levels in the usage of targeted grammatical constructions. Ohta’s (2000) study examines two students in a university Japanese language course collaboratively working on a form-focused activity concerned with grammatical accuracy. Working from a sociocultural perspective, Ohta’s study emphasizes how interaction between the focal students constituted the construction of not only greater grammatical competence but also of greater sociolinguistic

awareness of how the targeted forms should be used (Ohta 2000: 51). The study highlights the manner in which “experts”, which can either be more advanced learners or native speakers, aid more “novice” members within the learning community through scaffolding, or “assisted performance” (Tharp and Gallimore 1991 in Ohta 2000: 53), which is defined as the “assistance [...] provided from person to person such that an interlocutor is enabled to do something she or he might not have been able to do otherwise.” In the study, Hal assisted Becky in instances when Becky was aware of her own difficulties, which Ohta (2000: 76) contends, is of vital importance should scaffolding work. This assistance proved to be very effective in which Becky shows improved usage of the target grammatical form. Her capacity to use the target linguistic forms remained throughout the follow up interview task as well as her reflexive report to her instructor. As Ohta notes, the grammar translation task featured in the study would not meet the criteria associated with state-of-the-art language teaching, communicative-based pedagogy; however, the two learners were able to appropriate the task, creatively transforming it into a communicative activity which led to the acquisition of a difficult grammatical structure. Ohta (2000: 76) concludes learner engagement in tasks is centrally important and that the effectiveness of assisted learning lies in “teamwork and mutual sensitivity”.

Ohta's study illustrates how "classroom interaction promotes L2 development in the ZPD" (Ohta 2000: 75) through the mediation of “learner - learner interactive processes”. Ohta concludes that further studies examining peer assisted learning are needed in order to understand the multitude of factors that are involved in L2 learning across different contexts and involving a range of learners. Finally, Ohta emphasizes the importance of task design in noting that the ways in which learners instantiate a task are difficult to predict and may diverge from the anticipated use of the task by the task designers. Ohta maintains that while the effectiveness of a task cannot be adequately assessed through examination of the task itself, it is true that learners can appropriate a task through its instantiation. Further studies are needed that address what learners actually do with tasks and how such activity relates to language learning before we can clearly know the advantages of some tasks over others.

2.3.2 Learner agency in the sociocultural approach

Vygotsky's conceptualization of learning as progressing from social interaction to cognitive appropriation places particular emphasis on the ways in which learners relate to their social environments. As noted in previous sections, the unit of analysis is not the "linguistic input" a language learner receives, but rather the learner/participant situated within a particular activity (van Lier 2008: 1). Thus sociocultural researchers working in the field of SLA contend that learning outcomes are fundamentally dependent on classroom activity and the quality of the social framework in which learners participate (Lantolf and Genung 2002: 176). In this view, learners are seen as people, as agents, who negotiate and are involved in the construction of the terms of their own learning (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 145).

In line with Vygotsky's view, Wertsch, Tulviste and Hagstrom (1993: 337), working in the fields of psychology and anthropology, view agency as both "intermental" and "intramental", which is to say that agency is an emergent interplay of cognitive processes intricately tied to social phenomena (Wertsch et al. 1993: 337). In contesting the popularly held Western psychological view of agency as an individual property, or characteristic that is possessed by individual, Wertsch et al. (1993: 338) propose the construct of "mediated agency" to account for the "socially distributed" nature of individual cognition. Wertsch et al. (ibid) base their argument on their observation that the mediational means, or cultural tools, that constitute both individual cognitive functioning, as well as our salient sociocultural practices, are profoundly influenced by larger society in dialectical relationships. Consequently, Wertsch et al. contend that agency can only be meaningfully understood through both an understanding of macro social factors, and through the analysis of the micro, domain-specific level, in which actors are situated.

Sociocultural scholars within the fields of SLA have frequently drawn on Ahearn's (2001: 112) definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (van Lier 2008; Lantolf and Pavlenko 20001; Thorne 2005) as a starting point for defining what has been regarded as a complex social construct and one which is difficult to identify in social practice. In expanding on this definition, van Lier (2008: 1) cites Lantolf and Thorne (2006) in stating that agency entails both voluntary control over one's behavior as well as a socioculturally mediated awareness regarding social events. As van Lier (2008: 1) notes, an individual's actions never occur in a social vacuum but rather only take on meaning within culturally and historically constructed settings. Consequently, one significant dimension of

agency involves the capacity of a participant to evaluate and interpret the meaning of social events within a determined context. Thus with the concomitant aspects of intentionality and a socially oriented evaluative capacity, van Lier's (2008: 1) states that Ahearn's definition concerning "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" does not refer to a "competence (as an individual possession), but rather is seen as action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors." According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 143), agency can be exercised by individuals, and by groups, which is of significance to socioculturally based SLA research characterizing how creative agency expressed at the level of the group can lead to especially rich and collaborative learning environments.

Sociocultural theory sees agency as not only being mediated by material and symbolic tools, but also by social formations, both real and imagined. Thorne (2005: 400) points to the proximal communities of practice in which the individual takes part (see Lave & Wenger 1991), distant communities, and imagined communities (see Wenger 1998) as formative of agency. I will discuss the community of practice (COP) construct, as well as the construct of 'imagined communities' in greater detail in the next chapter.

Finally agency is also seen as being historically situated in emphasizing the significance that the learner's educational history has. Specifically, learners inevitably are exposed to "language ideologies" in the form of implicit and explicit institutional discourses at work within institutional contexts (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 148). Exposure to language ideologies, as well as participation in the social and cultural-material environments in which a learner moves, both form part of the learner's habitus (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146). Habitus, a term popularized by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) is defined as "a set of socially and interactionally derived generative dispositions that enable and constrain agency" (Thorne 2005: 405). In this view, habitus is not deterministic; but rather is an ongoing development and is subject to change since "human agents are capable (given the right circumstances) of critically analyzing the discourses which frame their lives" (Burr in Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146).

Van Lier (2008: 3) proposes the construct of 'agency' as the "umbrella" under which similar constructs such as 'autonomy', 'motivation', and 'intentionality', among others, become synonymous with agency, with each carrying slightly different connotations but

fundamentally "sharing strong resemblances" as "family members" and ultimately meaning the same thing. Van Lier (ibid) points out that agency is a complex social construct, one which is difficult to identify within naturalized contexts, and thus warns against the tendency within the analysis of any complex social construct to use binary oppositions, or simple dichotomies.

Thorne (2005: 401) further points out that "agency is mutable", which he argues is crucial in an educational setting, if the "emancipatory element of education is, or should be, built." The pedagogical focus of a given activity in a language classroom may range from pragmatic to grammatical in nature. However, as Thorne points out, of equal importance "is for outcomes of a local action to enhance an individual's capacity to perform relevant and competent identities." Sociocultural theory, like critical pedagogy, asserts that language learning contexts should not only enhance performance at the communicative level but also enhance the individual's development as a person (ibid). From a sociocultural perspective, this principle can be articulated in the statement that SLA transcends "the [mere] acquisition of forms: it is about developing, or failing to develop, new ways of mediating ourselves and our relationships" (Lantolf & Pavlenko in Thorne 401: 2005). To these ends, one of the areas that have received a lot of interest in research has been the various forms of social mediation of agency in language learning contexts.

In this thesis, I will use the term 'learner engagement' as synonymous to 'learner agency', or simply 'agency', in taking van Lier's (2008: 3) view that the different terminology - "agency, motivation, intentionality" - although potentially carrying slightly different connotations, essentially points to the same social construct. In my literature review, I use the term "agency" where authors have used it in their own studies. However, in my own data I will use the term "learner engagement" because I believe it more fully reflects the view that language learners participate in target practices within their learning sociocultural environments, and that, consequently, learners are constantly engaged in dynamic dialectical relationships involving other community members, cultural tools, and dominant discourses. In taking van Lier's (2008: 1) contention that agency, or engagement, is not an achievement or possession of the individual but rather is an "action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors." As Wertsch et al. (1993: 338) contend, I take the position that learner engagement (within class practices) can only be

meaningfully understood through an awareness of macro social factors, and through the analysis of the micro, domain-specific level, in which learners are situated.

2.4 Criticisms of the sociocultural approach

One criticism that has been levelled at the sociocultural approach is the “idealized perspective” among sociocultural practitioners that formal education, as well as the theorization surrounding education, equitably affects different populations across diverse contexts (Thorne 2005: 396). The fundamental assumption that education constitutes a positive intervention ignores what critical pedagogues have argued as the tendency for formal education to favor some populations while often further marginalizing already socially disadvantaged populations (Thorne 2005: 396). This is particularly due to the fact that social inequity implies the uneven distribution of what Martin (in Thorne 2005: 396) refers to as “meaning potential”, or the ability to collaborate in the construction of meaning for oneself and others in relationship to dominant “power genres”. Thorne (2005: 397) concludes that renewed emphasis within sociocultural theory-based research is being directed towards what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) characterized as the “symbolic violence” inherent in educational settings in which epistemological assumptions and the subsequent positioning of students by dominant discourses are not critically engaged. Increasingly sociocultural theory is being combined with critical pedagogy to better comprehend the manners in which complex relationships of power, along with the manners in which agency and identity are enacted, can potentially shape learning contexts.

2.4.1 Debates in SLA: cognitive versus social stances

A lively debate came about when Firth and Wagner (1997: 295) published an impactful, and to some, polemical, article in the *Modern Language Journal* in 1997. Firth and Wagner make a case for a reconceptualization of the field of SLA based on “a belief that methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalist orientations and social and contextual orientations to language, the former orientation being unquestionably in the ascendancy.” At the heart of their arguments was their view that the majority of SLA research focusing on acquisition, particularly the theorization of the data,

had led to “a skewed perspective on discourse and language”, and, thus, call for a “holistic” perspective within the field of SLA in which the assumed existence of a binary of the social and individual, cognitive domains is problematized (Firth and Wagner 1997: 296). In particular, Firth and Wagner (1997: 285) argue that the unproblematized use of the concepts of ‘native’, ‘non-native’, ‘learner’, and ‘interlanguage’ had led to unchallenged notions of the language learner identity as “deficient communicator” attempting to transcend faulty L2 competence and attain “the target competence of an idealized native speaker”. Such idealized competence, argue Firth and Wagner, assume the status of a “normal” or “standard” way of speaking, relegating the ideal native speaker as a point of reference of baseline data upon which learners are compared in measuring their proficiency in the target language. Firth and Wagner go on to examine several “mainstream” SLA articles in which they take to task assumptions underlying the analysis of data collected. For example, the article takes aim at the kinds of characterizations of native speaker (NS) - non-native speaker (NNS) interaction provided in Yano, Long, and Ross (1994 in Firth and Wagner 1997: 293), who conclude that “conversation with NNS [and NS] tend to have a more here-and-now orientation and to treat a more predictable, narrower, range of topics more briefly.”

Such generalizations, according to Firth and Wagner (1997: 291) ignore the fact that learners possess a range of resources, “however seemingly imperfect”, and that participants collaboratively construct meaning in the process of achieving meaningful communication. They conclude that problems in communication are more fruitfully seen as related to social interaction and “not invariably as ‘things’ *possessed* by individuals” (italics not in the original) and argue for a more “emic stance” in SLA research in which context, social identity, and other contextual factors are taken into account. Their arguments amount to a challenge of the treatment of language research in line with the scientific method in which the assumption of baseline data (i.e. the ideal native speaker) and the isolation of variables can be achieved in order to better comprehend how language is acquired. Finally, Firth and Wagner argue for the need for more SLA research to be done in naturalistic settings to take into account salient social, contextual factors in which language use takes place.

Long (1997: 319), representing perhaps the most critical of voices, responds to Firth and Wagner, arguing that the goal of SLA is to examine *acquisition* as opposed to “the nature of language *use*” or “the language use of second or foreign language speakers” (italics in the original). Long states that, while of interest, the empirical research generated within the field

of sociolinguistics had had, to date, contributed little in furthering the understanding of the manners in which language is actually acquired. The field of SLA, argues Long, is centrally concerned with the internal mental processes surrounding “*the acquisition of new (linguistic) knowledge*” (italics in the original) and that, although language learning takes place in a variety of social settings, the research endeavor should center around the development of theories that address significant internal cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, as opposed to shifting investigation to the social settings and contexts in which language acquisition takes place. In this view, language acquisition is constituted by mental processes, and the objective of enquiry is to understand the manner in which “the partly idiosyncratic, changing mental representation of the L2” remains in the minds of learners, as well as examining relevant factors pertaining to the learner: instructional practices and, to a limited extent, aspects of social context that influence such mental processes (Long 1997: 319). Long asserts that a large body of research illustrates that while affective and social factors can be significant to SLA research, they are “relatively minor in their impact” on the acquisition of language, and, therefore, it would be “dangerous” to give precedence to socially-based theoretical paradigms when the field of SLA is still in its infancy.

Long (1997: 320) emphasizes that, in fact, the isolation and/or control of variables within traditional cognitivist models has represented a strength in the growing body of SLA research, and not a weakness as Firth and Wagner had argued. Furthermore, Long states that empirical evidence showing the manners in which social identity influences language acquisition was lacking, and that the often employed identity categories of NS-NNs within SLA research had been highly relevant to a range of research contexts examining language acquisition. Long further states that the assertions of Firth and Wagner in stating that certain characterizations had positioned second or foreign language speakers unfairly as “deficient speakers” had overlooked the fact that a growing body of empirical data had largely confirmed the kinds of characterizations that had been systematically drawn from a range of studies looking at foreigner talk (FT) and foreigner talk discourse (FTD). Long concludes that while attention given to social contextual factors, including social identity, could certainly aid in broadening the theoretical landscape, the study of *acquisition*, as opposed to the study of *language use*, necessitated the use of the scientific method involving the isolation of variables, which, consequently, validates the study of language acquisition in controlled settings vs. naturalistic settings.

Also responding to Firth and Wagner (1997), yet representing more balanced stances within the debate, Kasper (1997) and Poulisse (1997) agree with Firth and Wagner's central argument for an expanded theoretical understanding within SLA, while still supporting a fundamentally cognition-based orientation. For example, Kasper (1997: 310) agrees that it is problematic to compare learners to native speakers as the source of baseline data. However, Kasper (1997: 309) does not find the identity labels of "non-native speaker" or "learner" as inherently problematic, arguing that social sciences are forced to utilize theoretical labels for human agents. For Kasper, provided there is not the assumption that all "learners" are the same, the use of such labels in generating data is warranted. Ultimately, Kasper (1997: 310) points out that a significant weakness of Firth and Wagner (1997)'s article is that while they purportedly aim to reconceptualise the field of SLA, they do not address the underlying mechanisms of "L2 *acquisition*", paralleling Long (1997)'s critique. Finally, Kasper (1997: 310) contends that while social identity and contextual factors within learning environments are likely to be highly significant in shaping a learner's acquisition process, the field of SLA, in its attempt to theorize human learning, is first and foremost a cognitivist discipline. Poulisse's (1997: 324) view concurs with that of Kasper's (1997), arguing that the fundamental research endeavor is to first "describe the basic processes of learning and using language, and then to discuss the contextual factors that may influence these processes", thus affirming the centrality of cognitive based paradigms within the field of SLA over more sociolinguistic-oriented paradigms.

In a subsequent response, Firth and Wagner (1998: 296) maintain that the epistemological and ontological dichotomy of language acquisition versus language use characteristic in the cognitivist-based SLA research paradigm is not tenable due to the fact that it is very difficult to distinguish language use from language acquisition. Consequently, Firth and Wagner (1998: 296) argue that the research endeavour should address "how language is used *as it is being acquired through interaction*, and used resourcefully, contingently, and contextually". A decade later after the publication of their original article, in a special edition within the *Modern Language Journal* Firth and Wagner (2007) revisit their underlying arguments for an expanded field of SLA. Firth and Wagner (2007: 803) state that their original article was significant in serving as a voice for a growing sense of dissatisfaction within the field of SLA with cognitive approaches, as well as serving to highlight the sociocultural turn in the field of SLA that had commenced prior to the publication of their article (see Block (1996), Kramsch (1993), Lantolf (1996), Rampton (1987) and van Lier (1994).

Firth and Wagner (2007: 806) proceed to highlight three social approaches representing methodological and theoretical constructs that offer alternatives to cognitivist approaches in understanding and theorizing L2 learning. Firstly, the sociocultural approach is outlined, which has been outlined in previous sections of this chapter. Secondly, ‘constructivism’ is discussed, which refers to the work of Dewey (1916, 1980, 1938) and Kant (1781/1946). Constructivism looks at the cultural and experiential influences as constituent factors in the development of cognitive processes. Finally, a ‘social interactional approach’ is outlined, which draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), and which I discuss in the proceeding chapter. Heeding criticisms of a lack of empirical data supporting more socially based theories of SLA, Firth and Wagner (2007) provide conversation analysis (CA) data of L2 English speakers interacting in professional, multicultural contexts. Such data makes significant strides in highlighting the manners in which L2 speakers successfully employ communicative resources in a range of institutional contexts.

Authors representing different positions within “the Cognitive-Social debate” respond within the same publication. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2007) argues for a more comprehensive theoretical lense within the field of SLA, as opposed to attempting to bridge the dichotomous epistemologies and ontologies characteristic of the cognitive versus social camps. Larsen-Freeman (2007) offers chaos/complexity theory within the ecological framework, as well as sociocognitive approaches. Such approaches attempt to understand the neurobiological development, specifically the mechanisms involved in human perception, inherent in cognition as it relates to dynamic interaction in one’s social environments. Furthermore, Lafford (2007) and Swain and Peters (2007) provide a detailed literature review examining the work of a range of researchers utilizing sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and poststructuralist perspectives in documenting socially based research in the proceeding decade from Firth and Wagner’s (1997) original article. On the cognitive side of the debate, however, Gass, Lee, and Roots (2007) contend that Firth and Wagner’s (1997) article did not serve as a new direction but rather only made existing views from both camps more entrenched. Based on the frequency of citations within the Social Sciences Index post publication of Firth and Wagner’s (1997) article (77 citations in total), Gass, Lee, and Roots (2007: 795) conclude that the impact of this article on the field of SLA has probably been minimal. However, on a more conciliatory note, the authors conclude that one positive impact of the article was that it had generated increased interest in situated SLA research.

Chapter 3: The community of practice and learner identity research

3.1 Community of practice

The community of practice construct (COP) as formulated by Lave and Wenger (1991) has been influential in a wide range of social based SLA research: SLA and applied linguistic scholarship examining academic socialization (Duff 2002; Duff 2004; Duff 2010; Morita 2004), learner identity (Gao, Cheng and Kelly 2008; Kanno and Norton 2002; Norton-Pierce 1995; Norton and Toohey 2007; Norton and Toohey 2011), and scholars working from the sociocultural approach (Hall 1995; Leki 2006; Ohta 2000; Lantolf and Genung 2002) have drawn on the COP construct to explain learner agency and learning outcomes. In this thesis I will give a short explanation of the construct in order to better contextualize my focus group data in the next chapter.

While Vygotsky was primarily interested in macro-societal practices as made manifest in the behavior of dyads and small groups in explicitly educational contexts, Lave and Wenger's COP construct was formulated for the analysis of human behavior centered around local practices in contexts that may or may not be pedagogically oriented and in groups that are often larger than dyads and triads (Toohey 2000: 14). Lave and Wenger's work, in fact, represents one stream in a wave of scholarship from the fields of psychology, philosophy, education, and linguistics that have used different terminology (sociocultural, cultural historical, or situated cognition theory) but all seeking to "better reflect the fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition" (Kirshner & Whitson in Toohey 2000: 15). In this thesis, I contend that the COP construct offers insight into the manners in which learner engagement is socially constructed.

The underlying basis behind Lave and Wenger's (1991) COP is the idea that learning is most effective when occurring through participation in socially relevant practices as opposed to learning in artificial environments in which theory is abstracted from practice. Originally Lave and Wenger's work examined the role of apprenticeships in the learning of trades and represented a critique of formal educational contexts. Wenger (1998) argued that formal educational contexts tend to be abstract in nature and to artificially separate theory from the authentic social contexts in which targeted practices generally occur (in Holmes and

Meyerhoff 1999: 174). Lave and Wenger (1991 in Holmes and Myerhoff 1999: 174) defined the COP as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a COP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

One defining characteristic of the COP, and that which differentiates it from the traditional sociolinguistic construct of the speech community, is the emphasis placed on practice. Because knowledge is equated with proficiency in practices, the degree of membership within the COP is also related to proficiency: core, peripheral and marginal membership. Key to the COP construct is the idea that situated learning occurs only with legitimate peripheral participation because “learners need to be allowed to participate in a limited way in actual practice, with only a limited degree of responsibility, in order that the learning context is not unduly pressurized.” (Holmes and Myerhoff 1999: 174) In this model, learning is mediated participation within situated activity and is equated with greater competency attained in practices: “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29) Thus, as participants become more proficient within the COP, so too do their identities within their COP shift from peripheral to core members.

In summarizing the criteria for what constitutes a COP, Wenger (in Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999: 175) provides three fundamental dimensions:

1. Mutual engagement refers to the relationships that arise out of regular interaction within the COP. Social interaction is regular and may occur in dyads, small groups or large groups.
2. Joint enterprise refers to shared goals and processes, as well as to the awareness that each community member has with respect to his or her personal role and his and her responsibilities within the COP. Shared processes imply that members have mutual accountability in relation to their community roles as relatively more core or peripheral members.

3. Shared repertoire refers to communal resources that are utilized for the negotiation of shared meaning within the COP. Communal resources, according to Wenger (1998: 130-131), include sociolinguistic resources such as shared discourse that displays alignment in perspectives, inside jokes, shared stories, and knowing laughter, to name a few examples. Shared resources also refer to material and conceptual artifacts surrounding understanding of how practices are and should be carried out.

Wenger (in Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999: 176) goes further in characterizing more specific characteristics of COP:

- mutually defining identities
- specific styles that seen as indicative of membership
- the capacity to evaluate behaviors as they relate to shared norms of practice
- rapid mobilization in addressing problems
- efficient sharing of information and subsequent innovation in shared processes
- awareness of the abilities of other participants and how such skills can be used to further advance practices
- eliminating the need for formalized introductory preambles

As social constellations centered around social practices, the COP is seen as dynamic in nature. Firstly, the practices and processes that constitute a shared enterprise continuously evolve as new knowledge is incorporated. Similar to sociocultural theory that holds that the interplay between cultural artifacts, human beings and the sociocultural environments are mutually transforming, so, too, in the COP, participants, their socio-historically formed perspectives and the shared practices they engage in, are mutually constitutive (Lave and Wenger 1991: 117), which is to say, ever undergoing change. Secondly, membership is also continuously dynamic. A COP, in theory, is self-selected, emerging out of social practices as opposed to being categorically imposed on individuals from the outside (Davies 2005: 557). To the extent that individuals come together around shared practices and resources and for a common enterprise, a COP emerges. The quality of interaction defines the COP more so than the quantity of interaction: namely, that interaction should meaningfully affect the nature of how processes are carried out in the advancement of shared endeavors. Finally, communities of practice interact with one another within larger constellations, which affects the spread of knowledge and innovation.

3.1.1 The COP construct in linguistic studies

The strength of the COP framework as a tool of analysis within linguistic studies is that it encourages micro-analysis typical of ethnographic research: for example, discourse analysis of interactions that would be considered representative of the particular COP in its naturalistic settings is required in order to gain an understanding of how meaning is jointly negotiated (Toohey 2000: 15). Hence, the COP is aligned with social constructivist approaches that also emphasize micro-analysis.

Subsequent its popularization in the field of sociolinguistics, the COP model has been useful in examining a range of L2 learning contexts embedded within formalized academic settings such as language learning among immigrant women (Norton 2000), university discourse socialization (Morita 2004), socio-academic relations of university exchange students within their academic communities (Leki 2006), English language learning in primary school (Toohey 2000), and academic writing of non-native post graduate students (Flowerdew 2000).

3.1.2 Agency and identity in COP

The COP construct illustrates that positionality within the community of practice has significant impact on learning outcomes, as well as on participants' identity. Lave and Wenger (1991) link positionality to learning outcomes in observing that the “social structure of the community of practice, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e. for legitimate peripheral participation).” The granting of legitimacy is thus fundamental, as Wenger (1998: 6) notes:

In order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members.... Only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion.

SLA scholars utilizing the COP framework have contended that language learning entails “personal transformation with the evolution of social structures”; it is also “both a kind of action and a form of belonging” (Wenger 1998: 4). Legitimate peripheral participation entails that there are multiple ways of belonging to a COP other than just the dichotomy of peripheral or core, and that membership changes over time. However, transitions within

communities of practice are not without conflict. For Lave and Wenger (1991: 42) legitimate peripheral participation can only exist where relations of power are at work, which inevitably involves struggle, negotiation, and transformation within the COP: "Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations". Thus the access to community resources and the extent to which learner/participants are granted legitimate peripheral participation has far-reaching implications on learning outcomes. In summary, learners are both positioned and potentially position themselves through the acquisition of community resources, including salient discourses and literacy practices in a variety of academic settings. As Morita's (2004) study indicates, which I will discuss further in the section to come, often times learners are not granted equal amounts of legitimacy, which in turn offers insight into the manners in which learners utilize agency, as well as take up certain identity positions, in response to various forms of social exclusion or other constraints on access to community practices and resources.

3.2 Identity and agency research in SLA

With increased interest from the 1990s onwards being directed towards the social nature of language learning theory, the field of SLA has seen significant attention given to learner identity. A growing number of scholars have contested mainstream psycholinguistic notions of learner's possessing decontextualized, fixed and unitary identities, described by reductionist personality dichotomies of 'motivated/unmotivated', or 'introverted/extroverted', among others. Similarly, such scholars have contested the notion that language learning outcomes can be explained by the psycholinguistic construct of motivation, alone. The pioneering work of Bonny Norton (1995, 2011) introduced into the conversation surrounding the socially and historically situated nature of the language learner, of language learning, the work of a different social and identity theorists, setting the precedent for other SLA scholars to do so as well (Menard-Warwick 2006: 256). Norton has drawn on sociocultural theory, the COP framework, as well as various poststructuralist theorists in postulating that language learning is deeply connected to learners' construction of self. Norton's work centers around the argument that learning contexts involve often complex and inequitable power relations and that, consequently, learner identity is a site of struggle. According to Norton (1995: 12), learner identities are dynamically constructed in historically and socially constituted settings,

and that learners, as agents, can seek more empowering identities, which in turn can affect access to symbolic and material resources, as well as the quality of community practices in which learners take part.

In defining the notion of ‘identity’ Norton draws on poststructuralist feminist scholar, Christine Weedon’s work, largely equating social identity with Weedon’s notion of “subjectivity” (Norton and Toohey 2011: 417). Weedon defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of self, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Menard-Warwick 2006: 257). Weedon (in Menard-Warwick 2006: 257) draws on Foucault (1980) in positing a deep relationship between subjectivity and discourse: “subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices – economic, social, political – the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power”. For Weedon, subjectivity is contradictory, evolutive and constantly being recreated every time one engages in social interaction. Agency in discursive practice is instrumental to empowerment: through the power of language, specifically by contesting marginalizing discourses, and even adopting more empowering discourses, Weedon maintains that individuals exercise their capacity to transform their subjectivity.

Thus taking a poststructuralist perspective, Norton (1995: 12) conceives of learner “identity as a site of struggle”; identity as multiple, complex and dynamically changing. Norton and Toohey (2011: 417) refer to the “paradox of social positioning”, in describing the contested nature of dynamically constructed social identity, which encompasses “the socially given and the individually strived for.” Norton also draws on Bourdieu’s (1977) metaphor of “capital” in characterizing the symbolic resource that the target language often represents for the language learner. Norton proposes the sociological construct of ‘investment’ to describe how language learners often *invest* in learning a target language with the understanding that greater language proficiency will entail greater access to symbolic and material resources (Norton and Toohey 2011: 420). For Norton the acquisition of linguistic, sociolinguistic and communicative proficiency within the target community practices affords learners the potential to take up more powerful identity positions within their proximal and aspired for communities. Investment also acknowledges that learners often have contradictory desires to participate in community practices based on a range of social, historical and discursive factors that can potentially (dis)engage a learner’s sense of self. From this perspective, Norton maintains that educational contexts, constituted by pervasive societal discourses,

resources and communicative practices, can either constrain a learner's opportunity to engage in language related practices or lead to enhanced learning opportunities. Fundamental to Norton's work is that language learning outcomes are deeply tied to the extent that learners can utilize agency to take up more empowering identity positions.

3.2.1 Imagined communities and imagined identities

A number of SLA scholars have drawn on the concept of 'imagined communities' to describe how learner agency and investment can be related in profound ways to learners' aspired-for future identities (Kanno and Norton 2003; Norton and Pavlenko 2007; Gao, Cheng and Kelly 2008). Imagined communities refer to the future communities to which language learners aspire to gain access as a result of language acquisition. Anderson (in Thorne 2005: 400) first used the term "imagined community" in describing the imaginal construct of 'nation' or 'country'; namely, that people consider themselves affiliated to numerous people with whom they never actually meet. Wenger (1998) also discusses imagined communities in suggesting that people typically belong to many communities; some proximal, others mediated electronically across great distances, and still others that exist solely in the imagination, but that all such affiliations potentially have far reaching effects in constituting one's sense of self. SLA identity scholars utilizing the imagined communities construct maintain that language learners' aspirational identities must be engaged within learning contexts if learners are to meaningfully engage in class practices (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 678).

3.3 Case studies illustrating learner engagement

A growing body of SLA research has focused on learner agency in academic discourse communities. Duff (2002), Leki (2006), Morita (2004), Trent (2008) illustrate the negotiated nature of learners' participation within class discursive practices and the relationship that participation has on learners' sense of emergent identity as members of their communities.

Morita's (2004) ESL study examines female Japanese exchange students' participating in post-graduate studies at a University located in Canada. Morita (2004) draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) construct of the community of practice (COP), a process view of language learning as socialization, and Prior's (1998 in Morita 2004: 576) articulation of the discourse

community as being “open, conflictual, and dynamic rather than autonomous, coherent, or static” in examining the ways in which learners negotiated “competence, identities, and power relations” in order for the learners “to be recognized as legitimate and competent members of their classroom communities” (Morita 2004: 573). Morita’s longitudinal, year-long ethnographic study combines class observations, formal interviews and self-reports, offering a thorough triangulation of her data. The data illustrates that students faced challenges in accessing class discussions due to participants’ self-perceptions surrounding competency (as speakers of English, of (not) possessing sufficient knowledge of the topic, or both), and due to social constraints, for example, some academic faculty and local students refused to accommodate to focal learners’ needs). Morita notes that focal students were not all granted equal degrees of legitimate peripheral participation within their class communities, a factor which Lave and Wenger (1991: 101) point out is crucial to learning outcomes and integration into the COP. The extent that academic faculty mediated the focal students’ participation in class discourse significantly influenced the manners in which the learners subsequently used agency in participating in class discourse. Participation in class discourse, in turn, promoted the construction of positive L2 identities as both more competent speakers and community members within their academic discourse communities (Morita 2004: 586). As Morita (2004: 597) points out, this highlights the co-constructed nature of learner agency, and the at times conflictual nature involved in learners agentively positioning themselves in discourse communities involving “power relations and competing agendas.” One student, Lisa, describes her process in gradually asserting her position as participant in class discussions:

I found that my self-image got really really lowered after I came here...I felt I have lots of English problems....It took a long time to empower myself. Still, I can’t say I’m confident...But I don’t feel comfortable calling myself a nonnative speaker anymore (Morita 2004: 586).

Through negotiating more opportunities to speak in class, Lisa utilized agency in constructing her identity as a more competent member of her academic community. However, not all the focal students confronted barriers to fuller participation in the same ways, nor did all participants desire to move beyond marginal or peripheral participation. Consequently, students varied considerably in the extent to which they choose to employ interactional strategies or sought assistance from their instructors in order to transition into more active roles. A significant factor to fuller participation was the extent to which course instructors mediated fuller participation in class discussions. For example one instructor was sensitive to

the focal students' knowledge gaps surrounding local educational practices and would make academic discursive practices explicit so that the non-local students could participate in class discussions. One student, J, comments (Morita 2004: 592):

In the beginning I was concerned that my perspectives might be too foreign for the class, but people seemed to listen to me with respect and they gave me positive feedback...The biggest difference between this course and the other courses I took this term is that *I could feel my own presence* in this course.

J's instructor's willingness to mediate participation by making class practices more accessible seemed to act as a legitimizing force allowing for J to engage as a community member. Morita (2004: 597) concludes that such factors as age, work experience and learner history (in terms of both English and academic discursive practices) were all significant factors in explaining how each of the focal students negotiated membership within their academic communities.

Trent (2008) also looks at factors promoting participation in classroom oral practices within an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in a university located in Hong Kong in which English was the official medium of instruction. Trent draws on Norton's (1995, 2000) construct of investment and Layder's (in Trent 2008: 32) "psychobiography" construct in analyzing the manners in which social interaction are governed by the subjective experience of the local (context and setting) nestled within the macro (salient societal and institutional discourses). The qualitative study follows four focal Hong Kong Chinese students, enrolled in the first year of undergraduate programs in Economics and Finance, throughout a twelve week semester. Data collection was comprised of weekly interviews conducted with the participant students, their two English for Academic Communication instructors, and economics and finance lecturers. Regular English class observations were also recorded. Students enrolled in the course had to prepare for a final individual assessed oral presentation. The class meetings centered on academic discourse in preparation for the assessment. Student accounts indicated that investment in oral practices was facilitated by the elements of what Trent (2008: 42) identifies as "knowledge and expertise" and "freedom and control". Students created "knowledge asymmetries in their favor" (Trent 2008: 39) when they were allowed to choose and elaborate on an academic topic of their interest in class discursive activities in preparation for their final oral assessment. This had the effect of making class discussions authentic acts of communicative sharing in which students claimed the identities of "professional" and "competent speaker" within their chosen fields (Trent 2008: 38). Such roles were in stark contrast to the economics and finance lecturers'

perceptions of the same cohort: interview data illustrated that academic teaching staff perceived that students were often reticent due to the fact that they had little understanding of the course material. Trent (2008: 39) posits that such marked differences in learner engagement in English class compared to academic courses could be explained by “asymmetries in disciplinary knowledge” favoring academic course instructors, which had the effect of inhibiting student contributions to class discussions. As Morita’s (2004: 587) study illustrates, learner reticence ought to be critically engaged as it often has multiple meanings. Secondly, English instructors encouraged students to take control over the “products and processes” involved in class discursive practices (Trent 2008: 45). In other words, students were given activity objectives and criteria related to course aims but were given freedom to choose how to reach those aims through small group collaboration. This in turn led to higher levels of student-reported investment in class oral practices. Trent suggests that even within academic English study contexts governed by institutionally identified aims, students should be encouraged to draw from cultural expertise garnered through participation in a range of cultural and academic communities of which they form a part. In this manner, students can more assertively contribute drawing from social and cultural expertise.

Leki’s (2006) study similarly looks at the interactional means that L2 immigrant and international undergraduate students at university in the US utilized to gain access into their academic communities of practice. Leki’s study looks not only at student participation within class discourse but also at strategies that students utilized to forge socioacademic relationships with their course instructors and professors. Such interaction, contends Leki (2006: 150), subsequently helped students forge viable identities within their academic communities. The longitudinal, qualitative study aimed to examine the literacy experiences of four focal students from China, Japan and Poland during their undergraduate degrees at a prestigious research university in the US. Bi-weekly student interviews as well as periodic interviews of students’ course instructors and professors were conducted during the whole of the focal students’ undergraduate studies. Additionally periodic class observations were also done. Drawing on sociocultural theory and the COP construct, Leki (2006: 137) contends that academic contexts served as sites of strategic negotiation of the focal learners’ identity in the interface between their hopes, expectations and capacities to take part in their academic communities on the one hand, and professors’ expectations and willingness to accommodate L2 learners on the other hand. Like Morita (2004: 599) Leki (2006: 150) observes that both membership within learners’ COP and learner identity were to a significant extent negotiated

through social interaction. Leki also notes that socioacademic relations that foreign and immigrant students had with faculty had an inordinate sway in shaping students' integration into their communities.

Leki notes that although in some instances students were publicly positioned in class as cultural ambassadors based on nationality or ethnicity, (the kind of cultural identity category that is "non-negotiable", "assumed" and "imposed" on students in a public manner (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004 in Leki 2006: 144), for the most part the focal students were not passively positioned. To the contrary, the students exercised agency in utilizing a variety of strategies to attain more "powerful subject positions" (Leki 2006: 136) as responsible and competent community members. For example, Ben, actively sought out and ascertained his professors' stances on the topics discussed in class, and then addressed, or even appropriated, such perspectives in his own written assignments. Secondly, focal students were highly sensitive to norms of their academic communities of practices, as observed by local members, and sought to appropriate such norms. Finally, focal students successfully employed the "symbolic mediation of language" to their advantage in order to gain the right "to impose reception" (Bourdieu 1977 in Leki 2006: 148). Two of the participants, Yuko and Jan, often posted hand-written notes when submitting assignments, apologizing for imperfect grammar, thanking the faculty for his or her guidance, or referencing meaningful social interactions they'd had with the particular teaching staff. Jan made calculated attempts to index his identity as an international student by making it a point to ask a question on the first day of a class, counting on his accent to make him stand out and thus illicit the curiosity and, perhaps, admiration of the professor. Interview data revealed that professors and instructors had largely positive evaluations of the focal students' "analytic skills", vocabulary learning skills, and "cultural sophistication from their cross-cultural experiences". (Leki 2006: 143) Faculty remarked that the focal students' presence contributed a dimension of cultural sophistication to class and lent to a richer learning environment for local students. Leki concludes that the focal students' negotiation of socioacademic interaction allowed for personalized interaction with faculty and constituted skilful participation in their academic communities of practice ultimately in line with the students' academic and professional goals. Such interaction engaged the students' emergent and aspired-for identities (Leki 2006: 150).

Duff's (2002) study examines the socialization experience of 19 students in an ethnic and culturally heterogeneous high school in Canada. The efforts of a progressive, conscientious teacher dedicated to creating a learning environment of cultural inclusion and acceptance of

diversity had the unanticipated consequences of bringing about reticence and disengagement from class discussion amongst immigrant students. For Duff's (2002: 297) ethnographic analysis, weekly observations of a Social Studies class were conducted over a six month period, along with regular student and teacher interviews, forming part of a larger, longitudinal two year study. Duff (2002: 298 - 299) categorizes the student cohort into three classifications of "local", "old timer" (OT) (immigrant students residing in Canada for 6 - 10 years), and "new comers" (NW) (immigrant students residing in Canada for 0 - 6 years). All OT and NW were ethnic Chinese, coming from either Taiwan or Hong Kong. Local students ranged in ethnicities and ancestry of origin: such students came from China, India, New Zealand, Korea, and the UK. The cohort was representative of the high school's approximately 50% student population of Asian descent, a large majority speaking Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language. Owing to its ethnically and culturally heterogeneous student population, the school administration was interested in promoting a culture of respect for differences and greater social integration of minority groups (Duff 2002: 296).

Drawing on Wenger's (1998 in Duff 2002: 291) COP as well as language socialization theory, Duff's ethnographic analysis illustrates that "knowledge and participation in educational activities are co-constructed and are crucially linked with issues of *identity*, *agency*, and *difference* (italics in the original)". Pam, the Social Studies teacher, attempts to create an atmosphere of cultural inclusion for her OT and NW Chinese ESL students through introducing topics surrounding Chinese culture (for example, burning incense for ancestor worship). In the conversation data, Pam attempts to engage OT and NW students in class discussion by asking about the burning of incense as a cultural practice in order to provide a space in which learners could assert cultural identities as Chinese. However, the students' answers are brief, mute or inaudible. Duff (2002: 310) argues that learner silence constituted a form of resistance by students refused to take up "the identity positions [their teacher] attributed them". Interview data also shows that silence protected students from what they perceived as marginalizing and racist discourses that existed among their Anglo Canadian peers. Duff notes that while OT and NW ESL student participation levels in classroom-based oral practices did not significantly change through the duration of the study, the same students for the most part outperformed local students in essay writing and other written assessments, indicating that non-local students were selective in their willingness to engage across skill sets and different contexts. Duff posits that ESL students' continued refusal to engage in their academic discourse communities could be explained that such students had

identities rooted in other local and transnational communities and, consequently, this shaped the extent to which the focal students felt the need to be accepted within their local academic communities. Like Morita (2004), Duff concludes that discourse communities are far more diverse and complex than models that predict linear, unproblematic integration, theorize.

In a similar study, McKay and Wong (1996: 577) follow the English language development of four Chinese learners enrolled in junior high school in an affluent neighborhood in California in a two year qualitative study. The authors draw on Norton's (1995) construct of investment, as well as Foucault's notion of 'invisible' societal and institutional discourses ('invisible' due to their assumed reality). McKay and Wong (1996: 604), like Duff (2002: 312), note that student investment in different academic skill sets varied considerably in relationship to powerful immigrant discourses prevalent in the school. For example, "colonialist/racialized" and "anti-immigrant" discourses equated English language proficiency with "cognitive maturity, sophistication, degree of Americanization, and general personal worthiness" (McKay and Wong 1996: 584), potentially positioning ESL students in a deficiency category as academically inferior or as possessing a "cultural handicap" (McKay and Wong 1996: 585). Paradoxically, "model minority" discourses surrounding Asian immigrants positioned some focal students as hard-working and compliant. The data illustrate that these institutionally prevalent discourses had the effect of minimizing or invalidating the focal students' prior knowledge and literacy skills, as well as establishing within ESL classes a "hierarchy of power relations" in which students that successfully emulated certain socioacademic behaviors were seen by their teachers as more competent students and speakers of English, despite actual superior performance on assigned essays and other assessments. McKay and Wong (1996: 592) note that students utilized agency to resist or supplant the "powerless positioning as ESL student" through selective investment in their studies. For example, one student, Jeremy, dedicated considerable energy to his writing skills in relation to his identity as "a model student", while Michael, a popular student and part of the "jock" group, invested more in his speaking skills. The study is significant in illustrating the manner in which students were engaged variably across skill sets. Student investment was tied to a significant extent to viable identities that the focal students could or wished to appropriate within their class communities.

Lantolf and Genung (2002: 175) look at the effects that relationships of power had on learner engagement within class practices and subsequent learning outcomes. Building on the suggestion of Rogoff and Lave that "effective learning and motivation are always socially

embedded” (Ehrman and Dornyei in Lantolf and Genung 2002: 175) Lantolf and Genung argue that, in fact, “it is the quality of the social framework and the activity carried out within that framework that determine learning outcomes. Utilizing a sociocultural framework, the study examines a journal diary of PG, a PhD candidate enrolled in an intensive Chinese language course as part of her doctoral studies degree requirements. The study illustrates how conflict arising out of PG’s conceptualizations of sound language learning pedagogy, as well as her expectations for how the course would be run, versus the instructors’ conceptualizations of language learning pedagogy, ultimately result in PG’s transformation from a highly enthusiastic learner, to a learner just getting through the course as part of her doctoral course requirements.

PG is described as a “successful language learner”, having learned to varying degrees of proficiency several languages, as well as having a formal background in applied linguistics (Lantolf and Genung 2002: 188). Conflict arises when PG finds that the classroom community of practice put in place by the instructors is centered around strict adherence to a teacher-fronted, call-response form of drilling. Students are forced to limit their responses to the target grammatical structure of the day and are unable to ask questions. In her diary PG expresses her frustration:

On July 28, the NS instructor was trying for the “umpteenth” time to instruct us in the use of the particle *le*. This particle had been a cause of confusion for over a week, and all of us were at our wits’ end trying to get it straight. Part of our confusion arose from the insistence that we use only a specific pattern to answer on any given day. What we said the day before, which was perfectly acceptable and grammatically correct then, was, magically, not acceptable and not correct the next day, because the instructor was drilling a different optional form.

PG further reports uncomfortable teacher - student interactions in which she comments that students felt at times humiliated and bullied by the rigid call-response format utilized as the “sanctioned” discourse style. Feeling that the methodology contradicted the purpose of the course, advertised as a course for focusing on “culturally appropriate conversation”, as well as basic reading skills (Lantolf and Genung 2002: 181), PG unsuccessfully attempts to have the class practices modified by discussing her grievances with the department. Ultimately PG resigns herself to just getting through the course as opposed to actually learning the language. Based on self-reported journal entries, PG limits her participation to the teacher-sanctioned scripted interactions. Furthermore, she also reported a decrease in private speech and vicarious response during classroom speaking activities; the kind of internal or self-directed speech that had characterized her prior language learning experiences. The study illustrates

that the authoritative positioning of instructors in class discursive practices had significantly diminished PG's expectations of engaging in authentic communicative practices (Lantolf and Genung 2002: 192). The study illustrates the powerful effects that expectations surrounding what constitutes sound pedagogy has on influencing students' desire to engage in class practices. A dramatic conflict between PG's conceptualization of sound pedagogy versus that of the Chinese language faculty ultimately had the effect of nullifying PG's desire to learn the target language. PG's agency as a learner was supplanted by the instructors' position of authority surrounding how class activity could and would be carried out.

Also examining the effect of power relations on student engagement and learning outcomes, Lee (2007) conducts an ethnographic study of Chinese students studying abroad in an English for academic purposes program (EAP) in the United States. Her study examines the interrelationship between Chinese students' identities in their academic English studies and discourses of globalization (Lee 2007: 92). Lee aligns with Norton's observation that "English, like all other languages, is ... a site of struggle over meaning, access, and power" (Norton Peirce 1989: 405). A critical dialogical approach was nominally foregrounded in the university's EAP program for the expressed purpose of encouraging students to engage critically with cultural differences and ideologies of power (Lee 2007: 92). Nevertheless, as Lee's study indicates, classroom discourses of cultural difference had the effect of homogenizing and exoticizing cultural differences as opposed to actually engaging such differences. In other words, the English language "critical dialogical approach" treated cultural differences as fundamentally static; to what Dei (2006 in Lee 2007: 99) refers to as forms of signification that are divorced from actual historical and political constraints and struggles, as well as real social realities pertaining to sexuality, gender, race, and class. Lee problematizes the predominant interpretation of "critical pedagogy" and what it actually looks like in a class setting. In the study, instructors positioned themselves as being the bearers of enlightening ideologies, as opposed to mediating an environment of critical enquiry of not merely asking questions but focusing on the questions themselves (Lee 2007: 101). This, in turn, positioned the focal Chinese students as socially or culturally inferior; the process of "othering", as Lee (2007: 100) refers to it. For example, Toring, a mainland Chinese student participant in the focus group comments on a class discussion surrounding China's human rights record (Lee 2007: 101):

Last semester, a lot of semesters, some teachers give us, like, cartoons and he said, ‘China has no human right.’ [...] And when we talk with the instructor about these things, they show, they find *another* articles or essays written by the western people to give us. I think it’s a kind of prejudice.

When Chinese students attempted to provide counter discourses in critically engaging the topic of human rights, instructors appeared to strengthen their own views. Lee argues that such “critical” pedagogy, actually reflected, in part, existing inequities of globalized power relations, as well as Eurocentric stereotypes surrounding various social and cultural issues dealt with in class. Drawing on Norton's work on identity (both teacher and student) and investment (in class, pedagogy, institutional roles) as dynamically undergoing construction in contexts in which discourses are more often than not constituted by inequities in social power, Lee argues that teachers should enquire into the nature of student disengagement as it may signify inequities of power relations and the subsequent marginalization of students as opposed to a lack of motivation. Lee concludes that when “othering” discourses are challenged and critical analysis is undertaken *with* students, as opposed to subjecting students, education can then potentially take on the transformational property that critical pedagogy aims for.

Finally, Gao, Cheng and Kelly’s (2008) study looks at the symbolic value attached to English in terms of emergent social identity among post-graduate mainlander Chinese students’ participation in an English club in Hong Kong. Through the analysis of biographical narratives the study illustrates the changing nature of participants’ motivation for continued participation in the club. What begins for participants as the desire to attain oral proficiency due to a lack of speaking opportunities at the participants’ universities, evolves into community building in which individual participants seek “personal meanings” encompassing both linguistic and “non-linguistic objectives” within the English club’s weekly meetings (Gao et al. 2008: 23). The club quickly evolves into a social community in which participants not only practice their English in a supportive community environment, but also have the opportunity to build confidence as public speakers, to form friendships, and to talk about a range of topics that would be viewed as taboo if discussed in their native Chinese. In order to contextualize learners’ participation in the club, Gao et al. (2008: 20) highlight the need to look at learners’ histories and original motives for studying English. Analysis of the interview data illustrate that while learners’ original motives in learning English involved academic and career advancement and is, thus, suggestive of instrumental motivation, learners also came to associate English learning with building

satisfying social identities. One participant, Shirley, noted her motives for participating in the English club:

I think what I have improved is that I dare to speak English in public. I am an introverted person and do not like to speak in public, even in Chinese. I am not talkative. [...] This place gives me an opportunity to participate in discussions [...] This is a SOCIAL place, where I get used to living in a community and to expressing my opinions and sharing them with others.

Thus for the participants of the English club, learning English served as a tool of self-development through community practices (Gao et al. 2008: 24). Gao et al. conclude that the data illustrated that in many cases learners were not targeting any concrete linguistic community in particular, but rather conceived of themselves as gaining access to the imagined community of young, modern and highly educated bilingual Chinese. Thus, learning English constituted acquiring a form of “cultural capital”. The study highlights the importance of the social framework, or the quality of community, in which learning practices are carried out, as well as the transformational aspect that learning takes on for the individual, as seen in the fact that different participants formulated different meanings for their ongoing participation in the community.

In summary, this brief survey of case studies illustrate that learner engagement was inextricably linked to several areas. Firstly, the capacity for learners to identify their roles and responsibilities within their academic communities, as well as being provided with sanctioned opportunities to meaningfully participate within class practices, were highly instrumental in mediating increased learner engagement. Secondly, where learners were able to construct viable identities within their communities, higher levels of engagement within class practices was evident. The role that ‘invisible’ institutionally sanctioned discourses played was highly relevant in this respect due to the fact that learners are positioned in powerful manners which subsequently shape their engagement within local contexts. Some institutionally-sanctioned discourses clearly thwart learner engagement where the learner is positioned in disempowering ways. Finally, learner history was significantly linked to learner engagement: learner history has been shown to be intricately linked to learner conceptualizations of sound language learning pedagogy and to the personal meaning learners attached to English language learning as a form of cultural capital.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 General research design

SLA scholars working from the sociocultural perspective, the COP framework and poststructuralist theories agree that descriptive, qualitative research methodologies are most suited to studying complex phenomenological areas involving human interaction. Thorne (2005: 397) draws on Vygotsky's observation of the relationship between methodology and the results of research in contrasting the "tool-for-result, which ontologically separates a method from the knowledge it produces" versus the "tool-and-result, which explicitly observes the ecology between the methodological choices a researcher makes and the resultant knowledge, description, or understanding" that the researcher arrives at. The underlying premise here is that knowledge construction, or the research process itself, is a "situated activity" (Lave and Wenger in Thorne 2005: 398). This observed ecology is seen in social approaches' emphasis on "process analysis" as opposed to "object analysis". It is also seen in the interest predominant in social approaches in examining participant perceptions of social phenomena, which are relatively complex in nature. As Norton and Toohey (2011: 426) argue in their comprehensive review of socially based SLA research, the study of agency and identity, due to their complexity, cannot be meaningfully understood through quantitative methodologies that attempt to isolate variables from participants and sociocultural context. Thorne (2005: 398) articulates this point well in stating that sociocultural theorists would argue that subjectivity, language, and context can be separately analyzed; however, such analyses are most helpful when done together, thus, forming a "holistic process ontology". These various socially-oriented SLA approaches conceive of learners as individuals with embodied histories and unique perspectives which are intricately connected to learner agency. Thus, the social strands of SLA research belong to the interpretive paradigm, which is of significance when considering appropriate methodology. Whereas the positivist paradigm posits a singular, concrete reality, the central methodological focus becomes primarily concerned with generalizability, validity and reliability, and thus quantitative methods are very suited (Baily 2007: 52). On the other hand, the interpretive paradigm holds that there is no singular social reality but rather multiple realities, or, in the very least, very divergent forms of meaning construction distributed across social interaction. Consequently, the interpretive paradigm "focuses on social relationships, as well as the

mechanisms and processes through which members in a setting navigate and create their social worlds” (Bailey 2007: 52). Thus qualitative methodologies that permit participants to articulate their perspectives can provide a wealth of data that is unattainable via quantitative methods.

Secondly, qualitative approaches have the capacity to unearth the effects that power and “language ideologies” (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146), as well as other structural constraints pertaining to the access to certain resources, have on learner agency. Qualitative SLA research recognizes Foucault’s notion that power is discursively constructed and its various manifestations in social institutions are complex. As Pennycook (in Norton and Toohey 2011: 427) notes that assumed categories, including “man, woman, class, race, ethnicity, nation, identity, awareness, emancipation, language or power must be understood as contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status”. Consequently, the innovation in qualitative methodologies within socially oriented SLA research, particularly giving attention to learner perspectives, represents a rejection of “grand theories” and methodologies. Qualitative research in this light looks to gain situated and nuanced understandings of the particular in which unique individuals, contexts, and processes constitute authentic and unique learning environments (Norton and Toohey 2011: 427). For these reasons the research process, too, is regarded as a “situated activity” (Lave and Wenger 1991 in Thorn 2005: 398) and descriptive qualitative research is best suited.

4.2 Research site

The data will be collected at an international university located in a major city in Vietnam. Vietnam has seen rapid modernization and economic growth. Since opening its economy in 1986 with the market reforms of “Do Mai”, Vietnam commenced a process of increased integration into the global economy (USAID 2014). The country has experienced relatively rapid economic growth as foreign direct investment and the expansion of its financial sectors have fueled rapid modernization of Vietnam’s infrastructure as it has moved towards an increasingly industrialized, export-focused economy. In this climate of economic growth, the growing demand for an equally modern and qualified workforce has led to demand for high quality university education (Vallely and Wilkinson 2008: 2). The university in which this research project was carried out was founded in Vietnam in the early 2000’s and has enjoyed

a very good reputation as a modern, world class institution, offering degrees in Commerce, Design, and Accountancy and, more recently, degrees in Engineering, Computer Science and Mathematics. It is one of the most expensive universities in Vietnam and I have often been told by my Vietnamese friends that students who attend the university tend to come from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Having worked as an academic English instructor for five years at the university, I would agree that students do tend to come from relatively affluent backgrounds.

The academic English program forms part of the university and offers academic English training to students prior to entering their degree programs. Students are offered two possible routes. One option, the direct entry route, consists of intensive academic English studies for one academic year, which upon successful completion, students can then progress to a bachelor degree program of their choosing. This option requires relatively high high-school GPA scores, as well as high university entrance exam scores. A second option allows students to first earn a diploma in an academic discipline of preference before being able to progress to the bachelor degree program. In this second option, the Diploma Program, as it is called, students concurrently study academic English courses and introductory courses to university subjects within the student's discipline of interest. The Diploma Program is open to students with lower high-school GPA and university entrance exam scores. Within the university, diploma students are recognized as generally less academically inclined than direct-entry degree students. This has been a well-documented observation among academic English instructors as well as academic lecturers and professors: statistically, as a cohort, diploma student achieve lower scores in degree course-work and have experienced higher fail rates in both academic subjects and academic English courses than the direct-degree entry cohort. In the last two years I have seen growing institutional awareness and discussion surrounding the problem of relatively lower levels of academic engagement among the diploma cohort. This has been extensively observed anecdotally among teaching staff: diploma students' attendance rates, homework compliance, and participation in class practices have all been highlighted as areas of concern. Consequently, several initiatives aimed at better understanding diploma students' experiences and perspectives, as well as encouraging greater levels of engagement, have been put into place. Earlier this year, for example, a private consultancy firm was brought in to survey students in the attempt to gain a better understanding of student perceptions. Additionally, an official at-risk program has been put into place, which effectively identifies potentially at-risk students and then offers

them weekly remedial tutoring. Within the aims of addressing the problem of student engagement, university administration has encouraged teachers to carry out research. In this context, my study aims to provide qualitative data through student and teacher focus groups.

The academic English curricula for the diploma program is considered a content-based curriculum and was only recently put into place in January of 2013. The English 1100 course, which is the course that the student participants in this thesis are currently registered in, examines a range of topics concerning modern social and economic areas. For example, free trade, supply chains, business ethics, labor issues, and the use of social media are covered in the course. Students deal with a range of authentic and relatively difficult academic texts, both reading and listening, with the aim to introduce students to and facilitate extensive practice of Western university academic literacy practices. Thus, the content-based curriculum is premised on the belief that extensively working with frustration-level texts will allow for extensive student academic socialization into target academic literacy practices. To this extent, the tireless efforts of a few teacher/researchers with extensive experience within the department has led to a shift of teaching ideology among staff in the academic English department; gradually, over the past year, concepts surrounding academic socialization theory, communities of practice, and sociocultural theory have been gaining more traction among both university administration and teaching staff. Through efforts of such dedicated colleagues, there has been a greater level of awareness of social-based approaches to teaching, as well as the official messaging we, as teachers, have brought into our courses. For example, students are increasingly being exposed to the vernacular of “academic community”, “community practices”, and “community members”. The hope is that through the popularization of such concepts, students within the diploma programs will feel more opportunities to engage in class practices as active members of their academic communities.

4.3 Research instruments

For data collection I conducted two focus groups; one comprised of students enrolled in the Diploma Program (currently studying academic English courses) and a second group comprised of academic English instructors. For a description of focus groups as a tool of data collection, I will refer to the work of Morgan (1997), who has written extensively on their use within the social sciences. Morgan (1997: 6) defines focus groups broadly as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the

researcher”. Focus groups can range from informal gatherings to relatively more structured interviews, being comprised of as little as three participants and up to as many as 20. Focus groups can be “self-contained” studies, acting as the stand-alone tool of data collection, or they can be used in conjunction with other primary research methods (Morgan 1997: 3). Focus groups resemble participant observation and individual interviews in important aspects while not always providing the same depth of information as these methods. For example, compared to participant observations, focus groups do not capture behaviors that occur in naturalistic settings. Compared to individual interviews, focus groups do not yield voluminous information about any one participant in particular. However, focus groups do have the capacity to generate a wealth of data in a short space of time that neither interviews nor participant observations generate based on the defining characteristics of focus groups: (1) the researcher guides the focus of the discussion, in conjunction with (2) extensive participant interaction (Morgan 1997: 15). Consequently, focus groups can generate a wealth of talk data (as opposed to other forms of interaction within naturalistic settings) surrounding the focus of interest.

In summarizing the strengths of focus groups, Morgan states that they are a very indicated modality for gaining insight into participants' attitudes and opinions surrounding a particular topic. More importantly, contends Morgan (1997: 20), focus group data yields insight into participants' personal experiences and perspectives. For Morgan (1997: 20) “perspectives”, embedded within reported self-behaviors and other interactional data, connote a broader and more in-depth basis from which attitudes and opinions arise; perceptions bring “together attitudes, opinions, and experiences in an effort to find out not only what participants think about an issue but also how they think about it and why they think the way they do” (Morgan 1997: 20).

Merton et al. (in Morgan 1997: 43) provide criteria for carrying out focus groups:

- (1) "Range" refers to the need for the researcher to allow for the discussion of a range of topics that cover not only those issues that the researcher has identified as important. Implicit assumptions surrounding the researcher's perception of what is important may risk excessively narrowing the discussion.

(2) "Specificity" refers to the need for the moderator to guide participants towards the recounting of personal experience as much as possible.

(3) "Depth" entails that the moderator attempt to get participants to interact with the target topics in an in-depth manner. The moderator can employ techniques that guide participants towards recounting personal experiences regarding the topic.

(4) "Personal context" holds that a researcher attempt to gain an awareness of individual participants' social roles and categories that they may occupy in the attempt to better understand where they are coming from and why they say what they say.

Although I take Morgan's view that focus groups, as a tool of data collection, can provide a wealth of data surrounding participant perspectives, I also take what Talmy and Richard (2010: 2) call the "discursive perspective" surrounding the manner in which interviews are theorized as qualitative data. The discursive perspective, or what Talmy (2010: 2) calls "the interview as social practice", takes into consideration not only the *whats*, or the content of the interview data, but also the *hows*, or the discursive co-construction of the talk data. Such a conceptualization is in contrast to the traditional, unproblematic notion, that the interview (including a semi-structured focus group), as a research instrument, is a "straightforward, unproblematic tool for investigating objective facts, subjective experience, and authentic feelings" (Talmy 2010: 2). The interview as social practice, on the other hand, conceptualizes the interview as a "socially-situated speech event, in which interviewer(s) and interview(s) make meaning, co-construct knowledge, and participate in social practices" (Talmy and Richard 2010: 2). Such a reconceptualization represents an "ontological and epistemological shift" in perspective, argues Talmy and Richard (2010: 4), in which the analytical field widens to include the interview, itself, as a site of investigation and where the researcher is recognized as playing an active role in co-construction of meaning. The defining feature of the discursive perspective is, thus, that the interview is fundamentally social in nature and that the perspectives of the interview participants are considered of the status of "representations or accounts or truths, facts, attitudes, beliefs, mental states, etc., co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee[s]". (Talmy 2010: 3)

There has been some criticism directed at focus groups. Firstly, due to the fact that the researcher controls to greater or lesser extents the conversation flow, focus groups, as an

instrument of data collection, have been criticized for not being naturalistic and thus participant contributions may not be pure, “uncontaminated” statements (Morgan 1997: 16). However, taking the view of the interview as social practice, I take the stance that the data will consist of discursively co-constructed accounts of beliefs, facts, feelings and narratives in which I, the researcher, am a participant, and the interview, too, is regarded as a site of investigation. Talmy (2010: 3) argues that since the interview, or focus group, is, itself, regarded as social practice and a site of investigation, the data cannot be ‘contaminated’.

Another concern is that polarization of participant opinion may occur, which is to say that participants may adopt more entrenched or extreme views surrounding topics than they would do so on in individual interview settings. However, Morgan (1997: 16) also points out that engaging with a topic in a group setting has the potential to guide participants to probe into and extrapolate on their perspectives and personal experiences to a greater depth than if done individually via interviewing. Thus, focus groups can highlight divergent points of view, which can be grounds for lively, dynamic exchanges.

Both focus groups will be very permissive of a high volume of talk surrounding a range of factors related to student engagement in class practices, and I will encourage, where possible, that participants recount narratives that illustrate their particular perspectives for the reasons elaborated on above. Due to the relative complexity of issues surrounding learner perceptions of engagement, there will be a low degree of standardization, or moderator control, where possible so as to allow for a rich range of discussion. I predict that the teacher focus group participants will be quite verbose in their contributions. The instructors that I have chosen have a depth of experience of teaching academic English courses at the university site and elsewhere. However, I think that a relatively higher degree of moderator involvement will be necessary for the student focus group due to the fact that students will be communicating in their L2 and about topics that could seem quite abstract in nature.

4.4 Research participants

Student participants in this study are enrolled in the Diploma Program and are currently studying in an English 1100 course. There are five student participants in total, ranging in age from 18 to 23. Three participants will be female, and two will be male. All were born and raised in Vietnam. In order to recruit the student participants I gave a small presentation

about my thesis project. The students are in the English 1100 course that I teach at the commencement of the semester. I was careful to not divulge too much information about my research questions in order to avoid influencing participant behaviour through a priori information surrounding the project. I chose this particular cohort of students due to the fact that they have typically studied for one or more semesters in academic English courses at the university prior to commencing their present course, and, therefore, have usually had fairly extensive exposure to the academic English curricula. For a second focus group, five academic English instructors volunteered, who come from the US, the UK and Australia. Two instructors are men, while three are women, and range in age from 27 - 40 years of age. Some of the participants hold a Masters degree in a linguistics related field, while others hold a DELTA. All participants hold a CELTA or TESOL certificate. The participants have taught academic English, English for specific purposes, or general English, ranging from 2 to 6 years. I recruited academic English instructors in person. They are my colleagues and I felt that they represent a wide range of experience, educational backgrounds, and teaching-related perspectives.

4.5 Data analysis

For the data collection I audio recorded one student focus group and one teacher focus group, each approximately one hour in length. In accordance with an interpretive paradigm of the qualitative research tradition, I repeatedly listened to focus group interview data, transcribed salient sections, and subsequently employed thematic analysis in order to interpret the data's significance. Bailey (2007: 153) defines themes as "recurring patterns, topics, viewpoints, emotions, concepts, [and] events" of particular salience to the research question. Unlike taxonomies, which are constituted of exclusive categories, themes can have elements that overlap, or, conversely, may not relate to one another at all. I take the stance that themes do not emerge, as if "the data speaks for itself", which, as Talmy (2010: 5) argues, ignores the "theoretical influences, the interpretive activity, indeed, the sociohistorically situated *presence* of the researcher engaged in analysis." (*italics in the original*). The "interview as social practice" stance holds that talk data is situationally generated and, thus, cannot be separated from the interview context (Talmy 2010: 4). At the level of interaction, the kind of discursive co-construction of knowledge that Talmy argues as constituting the interview process is based on the fact that interview participants' responses are conditioned by prior

question and answer sequences. Furthermore, complex relations of power can indelibly shape the sociality of the interview; specifically, asymmetries, including gender, ethnicity, social class, age, language expertise and a range of other factors, all constitute the “complex pragmatics of interview practices” (Briggs 1990 in Talmy 2010: 7). Consequently, Talmy calls for an expanded interview paradigm in which focus is placed on both “the assembly process” as well as “what is assembled” (Holstein and Gubrium 2003 in Talmy 2010: 4) in the process of data analysis and subsequent classification of the data into salient themes. Talmy’s analysis of data from an ethnographic study of an ESL class in Hawai’i illustrates the manner in which the interview served as a site of reproduction of the diminutive classification of “fresh off the boat” (FOB) versus old-timer ESL students. Talmy’s (2010: 2) data illustrate how old-timer students’ identity of distinction from the FOB category was interactionally constructed together with the interviewer/researcher. Talmy’s analysis of the interactional dimension of the *how’s*, or the discursive co-construction of the interview data, is very in-depth and utilizes the analytic procedures seen in conversation analysis (CA). The purpose of this thesis is not to go into such depth of interactional analysis often seen in CA, but rather to emphasize the focus group participants’ articulations of their perspectives while taking into account that the interviews will be fundamentally co-constructed and collaborative social events.

Following analysis of the focus group interview data, I attempted to offer interpretation of the data in the form of a brief discussion section. Bailey (2007: 175) contends that interpretation aims at arriving at an “understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis.” I take Bailey’s (2007: 175) view that analytical insight, or interpretation, involves creativity: my analysis will inevitably be “mediated by the researcher’s views, skills, conceptual framework, and choices made” in the treatment of the data. Thus, my analysis may not be free of my own experiences, views, and the institutional and structural constraints in which the research took place. In summary, in accordance with the more socially-oriented SLA approaches, my research does not pretend to be totally impartial (Norton and Toohey 2011: 427) or value-neutral (Bailey 2007: 191). The epistemological assumption within an interpretive paradigm acknowledges the connection between the researcher and his/her final manuscript. Finally, my five years teaching experience as an academic English instructor at the university site may be helpful in understanding the data. As Heath (1982 in Barkhuizen 1998: 93) states, it is necessary in qualitative research to “understand the practical dimensions of daily language

use in the school setting” in which research takes place. My experience, thus, has the potential to bring an added dimension of analytical insight in better contextualizing the data.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 The student focus group

The student focus group was held in our English 1100 classroom after we had concluded class. Going into the focus group, I was a bit concerned about the extent that students would be willing to share their views. In preparation for my data collection, I had previously carried out a trial focus group and it had proven quite difficult to get the students to elaborate on their perceptions: the students' comprehension of my questions seemed to be an issue at times, while at other times students seemed hesitant to elaborate. I reasoned that the questions may have come across as too abstract or that perhaps the students may have been shy or simply hesitant for other reasons I was unaware of; perhaps the interview seemed too formal, I reasoned. Therefore, going into the official student focus group, I attempted to immediately establish somewhat of a light-hearted atmosphere by way of joking around with the participants and emphasizing that the purpose of the talk was to say whatever came to one's mind on the topic and to have fun in the process of telling amusing, interesting or relevant stories, and only when students felt inspired to share. Talmy (2010: 2) takes the discursive view, or the "interview as social practice" perspective in contending that the interview is a fundamentally collaborative achievement involving all participants, including the researcher. From this perspective, equal significance is given to the content of the interview as well as the interactive dimension in which the interview is achieved. Taking this stance, I framed the focus group as more of an informal social gathering rather than a formal research activity. This relatively less formal approach seemed to work. Although in the beginning I felt the need to provide a significant amount of moderation through repeatedly framing questions, in a relatively short amount of time students began to articulate their perceptions more freely and in cases provide personal narratives. The narratives tended to be short and to the point, but, nevertheless, provided a good deal of material of which I was able to organize into significant themes that I felt best illustrated the students' perceptions surrounding engagement in their academic English courses. I divided the themes as such: "A collaborative social framework", "interesting outside materials", "the teacher as SLA expert", and "English as symbolic resource". For several of these themes, I further divided the talk data into sub-themes.

5.1.1 A collaborative classroom social framework

All five students in the focus group were emphatic in their insistence that a collaborative classroom social framework led to higher levels of interest in learning and, subsequently, higher levels of engagement in their academic English courses. The components of a collaborative classroom social framework emphasized by the students included extensive student collaboration in dyads and groups, as well as the willingness of the teacher to socially interact with students. Furthermore, a high quality social framework, according to students' perception, was most effectively built on the inclusion of authentic outside (from the course book) materials covering a range of relevant topics in order to stimulate meaningful interaction. The theme dealing with the quality of materials will be dealt with in short order. For the time being I shall focus on student perceptions surrounding the role of social interaction in bringing about increased student engagement.

5.1.1.1 Student collaboration within class activities

From the outset students stated they were more engaged when working together. One student stated the following:

Chuong: We can cooperate, we can cooperate together and, uhm, I think if we discuss together, uhm, the, the competitive element, uhm, it's very good for student...and I think, uhm, if we, uhm, discuss together we have a lot of ideas, more than just individual.

All five students emphasized that group collaboration enhanced learning due to the fact that students could pool ideas, and that such synergy led to the emergence of better ideas than students worked independently. The sharing of knowledge, the students claimed, allowed them to come to grips with difficult class activities aimed at introducing and becoming more proficient in academic English literacy practices, particularly involving academic reading and writing. The academic English curricula at the university seek to extensively expose students to Western academic literacy practices in preparation for tertiary degree studies (REW 2011: 9). Frustration-level texts are featured in the course books, which typically consist of authentic academic texts which students read in order to learn about different academic and socially-oriented topics. On a weekly basis students practice academic reading strategies.

Subsequently, students are required to write short summaries of and responses to the articles in which they comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the texts, as well as providing brief reflections on the texts' argument. This is an ongoing assessed project called the response journal (RJ). The students' comments in the following interaction illustrated their perceptions surrounding the difficulty of such academic English reading and writing practices.

T: ...summary and response...how do you feel about the RJ? Because I think you've already done it before, right? in L5

[laughter]

Trang: [laughing, jokingly] I think it's good for reading

Loc: [laughing, feigning solemnness] normal

T: [laughing] normal?

Loc: It depends on the article in the book. All the teacher gave give us is interesting but sometimes teacher ask us to go to BlackBoard and find article there. But article is very difficult and boring.

T: Yah. Do you like to spend a lot of time, taking apart the reading, talk about it, go to the RJ, do you find that useful?

Various students: [emphatically] Yes, yes

Loc: It's very easier when we do it in a group we did, but it's more difficult when we do it alone at at home.

T: Hmmm. The articles sometimes are hard and long, so do you find it, like, useful and helpful to do it in group?

Loc: yah, we can share...

....

Trang: Some reading is very long so students cannot know about main idea

T: It's easy to get lost, right?

Trang: [whispering, emphatically] yah, yah

In the interaction above all student participants expressed that reading academic articles and summarizing them in their response journal was considered a useful tool for learning conceptual and linguistic knowledge, while also improving their proficiency in academic literacy practices. However, students expressed displeasure at having to tackle difficult reading texts on their own, stating that texts could be "very boring" and/or too difficult to comprehend. In order to confront such difficulties, students strongly agreed that extensively

working with the reading texts in class through a range of collaborative activities involving reading, analysis, discussion, and a competitive interactive element were all very desirable activities. In the next dialogue, I ask students to reflect on a “good reading lesson”:

Yen: Teachers give the article, different article, and we work in pair, and we discuss about, uh, my, uh, article with my partner.

T: Ah okay, okay, cool...was there anything else that makes a reading lesson really good?

Loc: Hmm, uh, I, uh, in level three...the teacher give the student, they, uh, split the class into three...two, two big groups...

T: Okay...

Loc: ...and each group have the article which is, uh, in the same topic but opposite side, opposite vision, so the... each group in the group of students, uh, the students read and discuss it...so after that teacher put them to come, uh, at I think it's, uh ...compete, compete with the other to, uhh, make the teacher think who is right.

In this interaction the students suggested that collaborative group work culminating in a sort of competition, apparently a debate, in which the teacher decides “who is right”, constituted for students an engaging interactional dynamic.

To provide some context regarding common teaching and learning practices within the English Department, I want to briefly state that the academic English curriculum is “based on a communicative, task-based approach.” (REW 2011: 16). Nunan (in REW 2011: 17) defines a task as any classroom activity that “involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilising their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.” Accordingly, one of the fundamental organizing components of the curriculum is the belief that language learning is driven by meaning-focused, communicative events within the context of western academic literacy practices instruction. Thus, for example, the instruction of reading academic texts, from this standpoint, would seek to go beyond the single literacy event of comprehending a text, but rather also embed a communicative element of representing the text through authentic discursive practices involved in peer group work. Ultimately, such activities, or tasks, seek to provide students with the “induction into the cultural practices” that are specific to “the Western academic context” (REW 2011: 11).

In practice, a very typical reading lesson within the institution would consist of a reading ‘jig-saw’. The procedure can vary to some extent; however, it usually involves dividing up a reading text into component sections. Individual students, or students working in small groups, are assigned a section and then proceed to read and process it, utilizing various academic reading and annotating strategies. The students then get into groups and teach their particular section to other students, focusing on salient content areas. The students listening often are responsible for recording what they learn. The roles then reverse. This process is repeated until the reading in its entirety has been accounted for. This collaborative reading, processing and sharing of academic texts is often made into presentation activities in which students use the overhead projector or whiteboard. Some teachers, at this point, develop a discussion related activity, perhaps culminating in a debate. Other teachers, particularly in the lower level English courses that focus on general English language acquisition, as well as basic academic literacy practices, choose to integrate games in which students are physically up and active. For example, one common activity is board races in which groups of students compete to most quickly answer questions on the whiteboard related to content comprehension, or questions related to grammatical areas of the text.

From this standpoint, the student talk data reveal the student participants’ prior experience in the lower level academic English courses in which a rich array of collaborative activities had been utilized: all the student participants had done one or more of the lower level English courses within the department prior to enrolling in English 1100.

Getting away from the skills of academic reading and writing, I asked students, more generally, about their perceptions surrounding class discussions, as well as discussion related activities. The academic English curriculum seeks to engage students in the critical analysis of a range of social and academic topics through oral discursive practices (REW 2011: 9). In my experience, class discussions, as well as dividing students into small groups in discussion-related activities, is common practice within the English department.

T: Class discussions, do you really like talking about stuff?

All students: YAH, yah [enthusiastically]

T: Why?... Or, can you think of a good discussion that you've had...a time where it's been really interesting?

Yen: Can help I improve critical thinking

T: Ahh, critical thinking

Yen: Yah

T: So you, you like the critical thinking part?

Yen: and do to improve it because it can be writing essays [inaudible]

Yen linked class discussions to developing “critical thinking”, which, in turn, helped her essay writing skills.

Finally, students also highlighted the benefits that extensive class talk time provided:

Trang: When I come to [inaudible] and have many groups...I think it is easier to make friends...yas, and easy to talk to share about the information, yes, will...one people cannot do it good but all of the people do one thing too

Thuy: yas, because, like, we can do...with another student and talk with them by English...and can share a lot of information with them in English, because in Vietnam we don't have environment to speak English everyday...just only in the school we can speak English and just only in class, and after outside class we always speak Vietnamese, it quite difficult when we speak English with another Vietnamese student...so just only in class we always like spend the time to speak English, yah.

Group collaboration within academic English courses for the student participants was typically the only space where students could extensively speak English. The integration of communicative elements surrounding literacy events featured in tasks often requires extensive collaboration. Teachers typically require, or encourage, students to use English as much as possible in such activities. Students were in agreement that such collaborative activities created valuable talk time in English. Furthermore, extensive class collaboration and interaction, as Trang pointed out, served as the basis by which she was able to form friendships with classmates. She pointed out that it was important because she was new to the university.

The only skill set that the students said that they preferred doing on an individual basis was writing essays. Students limited their comments to their perception that it was desirable to write on one's own essay instead of doing, for example, collaborative group writing activities, which are fairly common practice in academic English courses at the institution.

5.1.1.2 Teacher as both facilitator and participant

Student perceptions also indicated that the teacher's role was seen as highly important in constructing a lively social dynamic in which learning objectives were being met. As illustrated in the talk data above, students perceived the teacher's role as that of mediating a range of collaborative activities involving different skills sets. Regarding the topic of classroom-based, discussion-related activities, Thuy commented on the importance of the teacher's role in ensuring that students remained on task:

Thuy: I think we not use it like right time, always discuss about the topics but we always like talk about our side of topics [laughs]...yah

T: Oh so you talk about the topic or you talk about something else?

Thuy: Yah, I see like all the students [inaudible] when the teacher tell them, like, talk about topic but they always, like, talk outside of the topic

T: [laughs]

Thuy: so it not really helpful for students

T: okay, and then the teacher thinks you're talking about the topic...

Thuy: Yah...but not, it the truth

It seemed like an opportune moment to get Thuy's perception on whether increased teacher mediation through providing more structured speaking activities could bring about more fruitful student participation:

Thao: Yah, I think we can like decide on it like two groups and we can, uh, stand in... in [inaudible] of class, you can ask the question...yah, and, uh, and if the group like...if who is agree, so can go to one side... disagree, can go to one side and we can discuss.

T: Okay

Thuy: Yah

....

T: Okay, so it sounds like it's good if the teacher provides a good structure, makes a good organization so that people have to participate.

Thuy: Yah, yah, yah

Thuy describes an interactional dynamic in which students put themselves into groups by taking a position on a given topic. Thuy highlights the teacher's role in organizing structured discussion related activities, for example, debates in which different student groups represent opposing view points, which she stated ensures that student participants produced discussion that was on-topic, as opposed to "talking outside of the topic".

However, student perceptions emphasized that the teacher's role should go beyond the mere facilitation of activities. Student talk expressed their desire that a teacher also be an active participant within classroom interaction. In asking students to share their experience in which a particular teaching style had been helpful in facilitating greater levels of motivation, four out of five students shared their views that it was very desirable for a teacher to introduce topics and mediate lively discussion through the recounting of personal narratives, interesting stories and interesting facts pertaining to targeted topics of discussion. In the interaction that follows, Loc references a discussion that our class had had immediately prior to conducting the student focus group:

Loc: Teacher talk about their learning style, about in their country, talk to you in morning we talk about American student how they learn,...and how, how, how long they learn in each day...and uhm so the way they do it and uh so we can know what do they do...so it can ah help me do uh, help me know more about the American student and their learning style so I can see and choose what is useful for me to ahh do the same thing like them.

T: ah okay, are you talking about our conversation, right, when I kind of shared my own cultural knowledge?...my own experience in American university, I shared that with you and you found that interesting, right?

Loc: Yah

T: Oh okay, alright, so kind of similar, right, you like somebody to share ...

Loc: Their own experience about their own culture

The lesson that Loc references had focused on making the transition from high school into university, and particularly, making the transition into a western university setting. The discussion centered around the culture of western university settings, including the challenges that international students often faced. To introduce the discussion, I had recounted my own experiences and challenges in making the transition from high school student to university

student, specifically focusing on the cultural challenges I had faced. Loc appreciated learning about my personal experience pertaining to American university culture.

In response to Loc's comments, another student related a narrative about how she had felt more "comfortable" with a teacher who would extensively engage with students in discussion when introducing a topic as opposed to another teacher who had often directed the class to begin reading texts without integrating extensive discussion surrounding the topic.

In contrast, when asked about teaching styles, or a learning experience that had made students feel less willing to engage, students described teachers that were relatively less willing to socially interact with students in broad-based discussions. One student recounts a short narrative:

T: Or, have you ever had a really difficult teacher that just made you NOT want to learn?

Thuy: Yah...uhh, he give us like the, the reading from the book and after that he like computer and, like,... we, we, we feel like wasting the own time in the class... don't, don't do anything, just do exercise in the book and after that he, he give us the answer, that's all.

In Thuy's narrative, the apparently mechanical lesson format provided by her instructor gave her the impression of an uninterested and aloof teacher. He assigned a text from the course book and then immediately began using the class computer. The activity culminated in the teacher providing reading comprehension question feedback. However, at no point did the teacher mediate a class discussion or go beyond the level of independent student comprehension of the text. At this point, Loc concurred, relating that in his experience, teachers with "serious faces" made students feel "stressful", an evaluation that all five participants were quick to endorse. This reference to a "serious face" gave the impression of a teacher who gave off the vibe of not wanting to socially interact with students. Trang, voicing her agreement, was then quick to point out her view that teachers were permitted to occasionally get upset and visibly show frustration with students when students failed to perform, as non-compliance constituted a rational reason for a teacher to become upset. However, she expressed that a teacher should also be happy at other times, showing the desire to interact with students. This, again, illustrated students' expectations of a teacher-participant, as opposed to a teacher as mere facilitator of class activities. In summary, the student comments gave me the impression that students desired authenticity on the part of the

teacher in expressing his or her desire to want to be there in the capacity of teacher and social participant. The students' comments illustrated that one significant way this willingness to interact was evidenced by teachers' willingness to facilitate extensive class discussions.

5.1.2 The use of interesting authentic materials

It is important to point out that in the focus group discussions, students spoke of a quality social framework and the use of interesting materials as mutually constitutive. Students were very clear in articulating their perception that interesting materials comprised the basis on which lively social interaction could be made possible. For the most part, students were very vocal in expressing their view that authentic outside materials were more interesting and pedagogically effective than drawing on the course textbooks alone. One participant shared her views on the topic:

T: Interesting. Uhm, for example, what kinds of outside materials have you enjoyed in the past?...can you think of any times when the teacher used really nice outside materials?

Thuy: I think, like, do the exercise, like, from the news... we can listening, uhh, from the YouTube ...or just... on the TED...you know the TED?... T – E – D...

T: Ohh, TED Talks...

Thuy: Yah, it's it really help, like, a lot of topics same, same, same as course, yah, and, uhm, uhh, they, they got like subtitles, as well, like, for we...listening and copy it, yah. I think it's very good.

When I asked why she felt outside materials were better suited than course materials, she explained the following:

Thuy: it make us, like, interesting in class more than study from the book...

T: Is that because in the past the book has been boring?

Thuy: Yahh [emphasis], the reading is quite boring and sometimes, like, we can['t] understand about it.

T: Sure. What kind of topics do you like to learn about?

Thuy: Uh, I mean, like, it still linked from the book, like, like, but just study more in the outside.

Thuy complained that course materials were “boring” and that at times the material was difficult to understand. Consequently, outside materials, provided they covered the same topics as course materials, were seen as more suited. The other students were vocal in their agreement. The benefits of utilizing authentic outside materials, according to students’ comments, were that authentic outside materials were considered more interesting, provided more opportunities to learn vocabulary, and were a better use of class time due to the fact that students could do the book activities at home on their own. From the students’ comments I got the impression that ‘good teachers’ used more outside materials, whereas less invested teachers drew more from course textbooks.

5.1.3 The role of teacher as SLA expert

According to the students, a significant mediating factor in explaining student engagement in their academic English courses was related to the teacher’s role as an expert in SLA. Specifically, students expressed their expectation that teachers provided expert guidance in both second language acquisition as well as the appropriation of academic literacy skills. These particular interactions were relatively more emotionally charged than other parts of the focus group. The theme arose when one participant, Thao, recounted a negative experience she had had with a teacher who, she complained, seemed disinterested in constructing a lively class dynamic. I then proceeded to ask her what the teacher could, or should, have done differently.

Thuy: He, he should like talk...talk more and uh explain for us like why is like this class like this and uhm like...teach us a lot, give us like uh ... what the way we should do to study it and remember it because like now we study a second language and it’s quite difficult for me remember it...

T: Remember the topic or remember the grammar...or...

Thuy: Grammars...yah, like it’s, it’s for my uhm personality, like I’m really bad in the, like, grammar, and vocabulary, yah and sometimes I’m like, it’s, it’s the reason like my, my writing is really bad, yah, and I feel really scared about it [smiles]

Of particular relevance, Thuy emphasizes that the teacher should have stated “why is like this class like this”, which seemed to illustrate her desire that the instructor explain learning objectives in a clear manner for the particular activity the class was engaged in. Furthermore,

she states that the teacher should have instructed students on how “to study it and remember it”, referring to learning vocabulary and grammar. She explains that she has significant difficulties remembering grammatical rules and that, consequently, her “writing is really bad”. At this point, Thuy shared that she was forced to repeat a previous academic English course due to having failed the final writing assessment. Consequently she was concerned about her academic writing skills and stated that she wanted her instructors to provide her with the criteria of the writing exams as well as learning strategies for her L2 that would translate into better writing skills. The other students emphatically agreed that they felt more positive about their learning of academic literacy skills, particularly writing, when their teachers provided extensive feedback and individualized support. One participant, Loc, tells of a good writing instructor he had had:

T: How, how, did he help you correct mistakes?

Loc: uhhh, he, uhhh, he’s ...uhh when I make mistake he put the icon ... uhh, the, the, the symbol, the symbol...the symbol, and uhh he ask me, do you, do I know why this is mistake...and if I, uhh, don’t know his, he will explain to me, fix...and, uhh, fix, he tell me how to fix, how to fix it, fix it.

T: Okay

Loc: and, uhh, well, if I make it uhm, and if I keep it...it make mistake again and uhh he will make I know the way, likeuhh, uh, force me write many sentence with same structure...

T: Ohh

Loc: But, uhh, in L6, when uhh I write uhh paragraph with uhh, mistake,...I don’t find it and maybe the teacher don’t put so that I can do...just, uhm, talk, uhm, say to me, you have mistake, correct for yourself.

Loc states that his ‘good’ teacher used “the icon” or “the symbol” when providing feedback on his essays which is in reference to the correction codes that are typically used by academic English teachers to provide language-related feedback on essays. Furthermore, the teacher also individually conferenced with Loc, asking him if he knew “why this is [a] mistake”, and subsequently encouraged him to do focused grammar activities. If Loc repeated the same error in subsequent drafts, the teacher was willing to revisit the error and continue having Loc practice the grammar point. In other words, this particular teacher was patient with Loc’s learning process. In contrast, his L6 (a higher level of academic English) instructor apparently told Loc to find and fix his errors himself.

All five student participants expressed that individualized support offered by the teacher was very important. This included the use of correction codes for students' essays, formative feedback on essays addressing content and organization, having opportunities to submit multiple drafts of the same essay, and, when possible, having teacher-student conferencing sessions. Students saw such support as a powerful form of teacher mediation leading to higher levels of student engagement. Individualized support was seen as especially important in the cases where students perceived that they were lacking in a particular skill set that could impede their passing the final exams, particularly in instances where students had been forced to repeat an academic English course due to having failed a particular skill set (reading, writing, speaking or listening). Two out of the five students stated that they had failed at least one course in the past.

5.1.4 English as a symbolic resource

In attempting to ascertain the student participants' perceptions surrounding the usefulness of English as a symbolic resource, I asked students about their career aspirations. I was curious to see to what extent the participants considered acquiring proficiency in English as leading to greater access to their career goals and perhaps associated with their sense of social identity as emergent Vietnamese university students at an international university and soon to be entering the workforce. When asked what her professional aspirations were, one student stated her goal:

Yen: become a businesswoman

T: Okay, if you learn English very well, what will that give you in the future?

Yen: Uhm I can go anywhere to find a job, be...ah, earn money. I can make a job with other people in other countries.

All five of the student participants related that their aspired-for careers involved the use of English. For example, Yen, Loc, and Chuong all stated that they wanted to become a "businessman" or "businesswoman" and work in "foreign companies" within Vietnam or abroad. Trang stated that she wanted to become a chef, and that learning English was a necessary tool in order to learn about a range of cuisines from different cultures. Thuy shared

that she intended on studying hospitality in the US and eventually finding employment there, as well. Thus all students felt that proficiency in English could one day provide greater employment opportunities or increased access to desirable career fields. Furthermore, students' visions involved intercultural contexts, whether in Vietnam or abroad, in which the English language could or would be a medium of communication.

I also wished to gauge to what extent students felt more invested in their academic English courses when their career goals were directly engaged in some form.

T: Oh, work with other people in other countries. Okay, English will allow that...okay...how?...think about your future goals. Does learning English help you achieve those or no?

Thuy: Uhh, really helpful because in now just short like dream, like I just want to finish and want to IELTS...6.5 or 7 to apply now, because in [the university] they don't have like hospitality and it's that my dream, I want to study...yah, so, uhm if, if the major, that's major uh we need to learn more English language, it to communicate community with another people...yah

T: Do you want uhm your English classes to talk about your hospitality?...to connect to your dream, of hospitality?

Thuy: Yes, yah, yah

T: Are you more motivated if a teacher puts topics about your dream into class?

Thuy: But, uhh, no, don't need because now I need to finish this first, like, uhm, you know in Vietnam, like, my parents is, like, still like old culture...old style and they always want me to finish the, uhh, the...the commerce first because like my mom, my family, my family just have like business uhh, like business of company, uh family company, yah, they don't have like hotel or restaurant like this but my dream is not about business...yah, and they want me like finish it first...and after that I can study whatever I want.

Thuy states that studying hospitality is her "dream", but her parents are "old culture" and are requiring to her to first complete the diploma of commerce before studying hospitality, presumably because in their perception hospitality is not the most viable career field. Asking if it were desirable to integrate topics pertaining to her professional goals within academic English courses, Thuy replies in the negative, adding the following:

Thuy: ...we just want to pass the English 11[00]...yah, and after that when we choose the major we can study more about detail about my major as well and now just English, just study and we just want to pass it...that's all [laughs]

The other students seemed to be in agreement that the primary goal of their academic English courses at present was to pass them; that while students had perceptions that English proficiency could serve as a symbolic resource in providing greater access to certain social and economic opportunities, such considerations were to be entertained in the future.

Loc: English is very helpful to me...right now I just think about graduate get a job, uh but in the future...I want to uhh go and work in the foreign company so I have more chance to go abroad...to work abroad...yah, because I graduate not good at studies so I can take get a scholarship to go abroad so I will ah go abroad by working.

Loc's immediate concern is mainly on "graduate[ing]" and getting work, leaving the possibilities of working abroad for a later point in time. However, not all student perceptions surrounding the English as a symbolic tool pertained to career related goals. The students also saw English as a useful medium of communication. One student shared her views:

Trang: I think yes because when you know...you know the another language, you feel very comfortable because this English is the international language, yes, if you know that you can, you can easy to talk with ah, another person, like err I have Korean people friends but I cannot, I cannot speak Korean but I can talk with her by the English language. Yah.

Trang speaks of being able to communicate with her Korean friends in English. There is a significant expatriate population of South Koreans in at the university and in the surrounding city. Trang continues with a short narrative:

T: Oh so you like English because it allows you to communicate...

Trang: I have ah same example, like when I travel two years later, two years ago I go to Singapore, yas, just travel and uh in that time I don't know about the English I cannot comfortable when I talk thing, but uh about one month I come to Singapore again and I can make and I can talk English...I can buy the the the clothes, yes, very easily.

Trang was visibly proud of her ability to communicate in English when on holiday in Singapore. The other students concurred that English provided a useful tool of communication when interacting with different cultures both in Vietnam and when travelling abroad.

5.2 The teacher focus group

The teacher focus group was held in a meeting room inside the English department in the morning. The atmosphere was relaxed perhaps due to the fact that the teacher participants and myself had worked together for two years or more in a, generally speaking, collaborative setting. Nevertheless, the focus group discussion ended up being a lively exchange of a range of views, highlighting several different themes surrounding teacher perceptions of what encouraged, or impoverished, student engagement in academic English class practices at the university. As the teacher participants had worked as academic English instructors at the university for at least 2 years, and some as many as five years, there was a wealth of perceptions and narratives. Some teachers leaned more towards the stance that engagement was related to intrinsic motivation as a character trait that students possessed, while other teachers leaned more towards the stance that student engagement was constructed through social interaction and the nature of classroom activities. Nevertheless, these stances were not exclusive, which is to say that although teacher perceptions differed significantly at times, I got the sense that the participants saw validity in perceptions that were different from their own. There was a strong sense of a collegial environment, which in my view was the result of the participants, including myself, having all had extensive experience working in the same institution. This sense of collegiality seemed to favor rich discussion in which participants aligned with their particular views and experiences in one moment only to realign with different views presented by a particularly eloquent or well elaborated stance provided by another colleague. This is all to say that even within differences of opinion and experience, there was a current of empathy and openness to a range of different perceptions. This created a particularly nuanced discussion of the themes surrounding student engagement. The themes that I identified as most salient are the following: “engagement as a product of intrinsically motivated students”, “engaging activities”, “a collaborative classroom social framework”, “English as a symbolic resource”, and “challenging assumptions of what engagement looks like”.

5.2.1 Engagement, a product of intrinsically motivated students

Commencing the teacher focus group, I framed the issue of engagement in a general manner, enquiring of teachers what factors they felt led to increased student engagement in their academic English courses. I wished to see what the teacher participants would mention first

and foremost. Two experienced teachers, Jennifer and Janet, both with nearly 5 years each of experience as academic English instructors at the university, explained that the intrinsic motivation of students was a very significant factor in explaining student engagement in class practices:

Jennifer: I think it always helps to have a handful of students who really want to be there, who really want to learn something.

Tom: [inaudible] They can set the tone

Jennifer: Yah, and the opposite works too, if there's a number of students that can just bring everyone down, and no one really wants to stand out.

...

Janet: I think there is a difference between some students who are just intrinsically motivated and actually might enjoy the sense of learning, that they can come out [inaudible] with something and then they give a lot more, and then, as you say, that can bring everybody up

Having a few very motivated, or, conversely, a few unmotivated students, according to these teachers' perceptions, could greatly influence the level of engagement of the rest of the class. Nevertheless, the conversation quickly shifted in the face of dissenting views favoring perceptions that engagement was a negotiated affair; that, though associated with motivation, student engagement was contingent more so on other factors.

5.2.2 An engaging activity

The theme of what constitutes an "engaging activity" received the most discussion by volume of teacher speech and brought about a range of perceptions about what, in the teachers' experience, typically led to higher levels of student engagement.

5.2.2.1 Student perception of an immediate take-away

Carrie: I'd say regardless of the students' motivation [...] I tend to see the most engagement when there's an immediate and visible result to the activity, for example there's more engagement during exam practice activities than there is during more uhm, long-term oriented activities such as such as annotating and taking notes in general and discussing ideas

Carrie's comment elicited consensus among the other four teacher participants that students seemed more engaged when students clearly perceived concrete outcomes of class activities and that the outcomes would serve to benefit students in the short-term, for example, to prepare for the course exams.

Janet: I found that making the learning objectives really clear, phrasing them, 'what you're going to learn in this lesson', sort of a bit, you know, develop annotating skills or [inaudible] same old same old, but if you can give them a specific take-away, 'okay, what words did you learn today, put them in a sentence'; almost going back to the sort of basic, which is quite hard to do with some of the bigger skills like annotating...it's quite hard to like, specific, WHAT did they learn, you know, what could they do better by the end of four hours that they couldn't do at the beginning of the four hours.

The teacher states that "going back to the sort of basic", in this example, learning target vocabulary words, brought about more engagement among students than "developing annotating skills". The teachers all agreed that teaching how to annotate reading texts, which is an objective of English 1100, was more difficult to get students actively interested in than other activities with more concrete and immediate learning objectives, for example, exam preparation, vocabulary activities, and other grammar related activities. The academic English courses aim to equip students with academic literacy practices, such as annotating texts, in preparation for entry into the various degree programs. All of the teacher participants agreed with the perception that students were not as engaged in activities that aimed at teaching academic literacy skills for the longer-term oriented purpose of academic socialization into target practices.

5.2.2.2 Familiarity with the activity

When reflecting on the immediacy of the outcome of the activity and student perceptions surrounding the usefulness of such outcomes in constructing a collaborative activity, one teacher explained:

Jennifer: A lot of times students will be like, ‘oh, the old style of learning, the way that we learned in high school, didn’t work for us”, but then if you actually use something like a dictation they seem to get more into it, it’s like something they’re familiar with [inaudible]

The other teachers concurred that student familiarity due to prior exposure (in high school for example) seemed to lead to greater levels of engagement. Hence, activities focusing on grammar or vocabulary were easier for students to engage in than relatively more abstract activities such as annotating texts due to the perception that students more readily saw the benefit of those activities with which they were familiar. These familiar activities were more likely seen by students to have more immediate outcomes and therefore more immediate value. Teachers agreed that communicating the importance of learning objectives associated with more longer-term oriented academic literacy skills was challenging.

5.2.2.3 The activity should be inherently interesting

One teacher pointed out that teachers had to be a bit critical of activities at times that did not elicit engagement:

Carrie: ...sometimes students are resistant to an idea or an activity because it’s not good [laughter from several participants] and you just have to be willing to ask yourself, ‘well, actually are they right?...is this a terrible idea, is this a bad activity? and maybe it is. I I’ve realized recently something I asked my students to do for homework was extremely unclear, there was a lot of resistance and now I’m like, ‘okay, I’ll let it go’. You know, try something different next time, but they were RIGHT! [laughs]

Another teacher elaborated further:

Tom: It seems like the activity, itself is very important, that it needs to be, itself, intrinsically interesting [inaudible] and that will motivate them [students]

One teacher agreed with Tom’s assessment, stating that students were interested in activities when they felt interested in the topics; that the material pertained to their future study or work-related goals. However, at this point the other teachers steered the conversation

towards the importance that social interaction had in mediating higher levels of student engagement.

5.2.3 A collaborative classroom social framework

Some of the teachers emphasized that an engaging activity depended on the nature of social interaction in elaborating activities. These teachers saw a collaborative social framework as both constituting an engaging activity while also transcending the activity and being a separate dimension in its own right.

5.2.3.1 Treating students as humans

In the middle of the focus group, one participant's comments set the tone of the discussion in a more social direction by emphasizing that the teacher's role was singular in establishing an environment that could either empower or impoverish student engagement in academic English courses.

Mark: I found that really the most success I've had with students in classes, particularly in CEP (i.e. the Diploma Program), are the ones where I didn't present myself as an authority figure [...] I think with a lot of students, they're tired of people talking at them, and they'd like to be heard and listened to and talked to as humans and so I try to make an environment where people feel like everyone has value...

Mark: the fact that they feel that you're, you're hearing them instead of just allowing them to speak, which I think is a common perception among students, 'it's your turn to produce sounds in English', you know, kind of thing they like having a dialogue with someone, at least with someone who wants to give them a dialogue, and those are the classes that, particularly the ones that were with the problem students, that they would sort of rally around whatever you wanted them to do

Thus, the teacher's perception that the most important factor for allowing student engagement to come about in an academic English classroom setting was the extent to which teachers mediated a class community of respect in which the teacher was "invested" in his or her learners by "hearing" students and wanting to engage with them. He felt that "genuineness" could lead to quality student-teacher relationships, which he felt was the most important element to encouraging student engagement. The other teachers concurred. One teacher commented the following:

Jennifer: The language learning classroom can be really intimidating, you're using a language that you're not really comfortable with yet no matter how much [inaudible] so like Mark says, keeping it casual for me encourages students to feel like they can say something 'stupid' and not feel stupid [inaudible...] Students appreciate a safe environment

This teacher perceived that a primary role of the language teacher was to mediate a space of respect in which making mistakes was permitted. Another teacher explained that when she encountered resistance on the part of students, she would use the whiteboard to note down difficulties that students were having in the attempt to encourage open and honest communication.

Janet:[imaginary student] "Teacher why, teacher really?"...I sometimes just go back...and then we just assess what's the problem [smiles] and we put it up on the board:[Janet] "Okay, what's the problem here, why aren't you doing it?", "Okay, I don't know what to write", or, "I'm too tired", or, whatever. "Okay, fine, five minute break, throw some water on your face, get a coffee, come back and then we're starting,... okay, you don't know what to write, now we'll work together to sort that out", and THEN sometimes they feel a little bit like...[inaudible]

This teacher saw that encouraging students to openly express feelings of resistance allowed a space of open dialogue and mutual understanding, which allowed for problems to be worked through. Other teachers indicated the importance of negotiating learning objectives through allowing to students to choose among more individual or collaborative activities.

5.2.3.2 The role of peer-to-peer collaboration and interaction

Only one of the teachers, Jennifer, articulated that providing an interactional framework for students characterized by extensive student-to-student collaboration facilitated higher levels of student engagement.

Jennifer: A lot of times like if it's teacher-led, if you're just asking them to, asking them questions ... so if it's like just peer discussions or they're writing down answers to like questions and it tends not be as engaging I think for them but if they're doing something that's a bit more active where they have to negotiate answers or they have to write a summary of their section and share it with the class then usually they're a bit more engaged.

Jennifer also pointed to the importance of having students physically getting up and active in collaborating on tasks:

Jennifer: ...if they're physically up writing summaries on the whiteboard (pause) maybe it's the physical thing

Jennifer also expressed her view that games and competitions were very useful in generating interest in class activities.

Jennifer: Competition seems to always work. It's like "we're going to do a skimming and scanning activity [laughter], and you're gonna compare answers with another group." [inaudible] Yah, same activity, do it by yourself, 'no', COMPETE, 'YES'. [laughter]

Mark: [smiling, humorous tone] They've done that up through level 3 (a lower level English course at the university). You know, and some of them who've been hanging around [laughter] (pause), they're like "yep, yah I know this whole thing,"... they're pros at that so uh...

Mark's comments that students are "pro's", having done games "up through level 3", refers to the culture of games and competitions that are prevalent in the lower level academic English courses at the university. For the five years that I have worked in the academic English department, games such as skimming and scanning races in which small groups compete to find certain lexical items within texts or answers to reading comprehension questions, have traditionally been a significant component of the lower level academic English courses. However, the focus group teachers are instructors for English 1100, which is considered a higher level academic English course, focusing on academic literacy skills, as opposed to general English language competency. At this point, the other teachers expressed somewhat differing views. One teacher felt that activities involving competitive elements could detract from learning objectives:

Janet: I find that sometimes a little bit [inaudible] there is sometimes that I find that students just get so focused on competitions that the actual [inaudible]

[interjection, inaudible]

Janet: Yah, the learning, like, you DO actually need to understand this article [laughs] rather than just like have written your answers, got them all wrong, [imitating imaginary student] “ha ha, you totally lost” [inaudible]

Mark: Hmm yah, there’s give and take, there’s give and take

Janet explained her view that with the use of games or competitions students risk focusing on the competitive element of the activity to the detriment of achieving the pedagogical objective behind the activity. At this point another teacher called into question the assumptions that extensive group work was always a good thing:

Carrie: I think part of the unwritten pedagogy here is skewed towards uhm lots and lots of group work, and I think that some students are, quite frankly, sick of it and would rather sit there and work something out by themselves and although we can’t always do what they want uhm I like to occasionally give them the chance to work by themselves or work in groups [18’]

Carrie references the culture of academic English courses that extensively use pair and small group work activities. In her perception, giving students choices allows for more authentic class settings that simultaneously have a range of interaction dynamics, with some students working individually and others working in groups. The other participants voiced agreement that giving choices, where possible, allowed for the accommodation of different learning styles and facilitating a culture of independent learning. In summary, while some of the teachers saw value in a lively classroom social setting in terms of facilitating student engagement, other teachers expressed concern that learning objectives risked not being met. This brought to the discussion the observation that the concept of ‘student engagement’ in practice was not easy to identify or gauge.

5.2.4 Challenging notions of what engagement looks like

Several of the teachers articulated that in their experience, identifying and gauging the extent to which students were engaged could be perplexing.

Carrie: You can't always see what engagement looks like. I've had classes where they looked incredibly engaged in the idea of annotating and I've walked out of it thinking, 'YAH, they got it, they're doing it', and they, you know, I'll look at their work books later on and their research and they're not doing it then. They were just kind of focused on pleasing the teacher, uhm...

Janet: And equally you get a quiet class that you think, "this is not working at all"...

Carrie: and then they come to you later with a question or an idea or something...

Mark: and they know EVERYTHING [laughter]

In the interaction the teachers comment on the fact that engagement can be very difficult to assess: students may look very engaged but upon closer inspection of their work, have not met target objectives. In other classes with reticent students, such students may actually be very engaged evident in producing high-quality work. This idea had traction within the group, with the other teachers agreeing that engagement was often difficult to identify due to the complex, multifaceted nature of learning processes.

Carrie then related a story illustrating an experience she had:

Carrie: I did this thing with students that if you looked at them they looked engaged, they're smiling, they're happy (pause) uhm, or maybe they were, a little bit, but I don't think we met the content objectives of the day...[inaudible] reading, I was doing the jigsaw exercise

Various teachers: Oh, yah, (murmurs)

Carrie: long reading, I had them teaching sections to the class, and they learned their sections quite well but despite my sort of guiding questions about how to make a good lesson for their, the students in the class just taught it really badly [laughs], uhm and most of the engagement came from the novelty of seeing students up there being teachers

...

Carrie: [laughter] and only one student did it well, and I was like, 'bugger, there goes half an hour', you know

Janet: Half an hour's not bad [laughter]

...

Carrie: The thing is it was not as successful as I would have liked despite the fact that it looked engaging.

Carrie shared that she had felt frustrated because the activity objectives were not met as she had hoped. While students were quite engaged in learning their reading section, in Carrie's views, they were not as engaged in delivering it, in accordance with her criteria. The

narrative was suggestive of a misalignment of student-teacher perceptions surrounding activity objectives and illustrates the difficulty of characterizing what exactly constitutes student engagement.

5.2.5 English as a symbolic resource

In asking the teachers their perceptions surrounding what motivated students to study in the academic English program, there was consensus among the teachers that students perceived English to be a symbolic resource.

Mark: Speaking English is a sign of all kinds of things,

Jennifer: of status

Mark: Yah, there's a status, there's like an awareness of the world, you know, people take you, there's a perception that you're taken more seriously, or more professional, more intelligent...uhm whether any of that is true or not is, you know, is debatable

There was agreement among teachers that in their experience most students often associated English proficiency with increased social status and economic opportunities in the future. One teacher comments on a common perception that she had seen in her students:

Jennifer: ...being able to speak the language will you get you a better job [inaudible]

T: Do you think students are motivated because they're looking towards their, you know, their future goals or professional, where they want to go, identity maybe?

Janet: I mean I think [inaudible] Vietnamese international companies are better [speaking of student perceptions]

[inaudible talk]

Carrie: Every now and again you meet one who just wants access to culture, like some of them who are really into movies and music and things like that. That [learning English] widens up the world and they're interested in learning about a country, to travel,... it's rare but you do see some students

Jennifer: You do see some students who want to live abroad

Carrie: Yah

Mark: Yahhh, this whole thing about... the job thing, I haven't met very many students who, particularly in 1100 or in AEP (the direct entry academic English program), who were thinking that far,... I mean there's like, I

suppose, there's like a general point to all this, the employment,... but uhm I I haven't met very few students who like, they knew the direction of their life, which I think is one of the, actually, one of the major obstacles in 1100, actually, when you're trying to explain things like annotating or previewing or any of these skills, really, because they're like, 'I don't even know what,... I mean I know I need English, English is good for me the way that I know vegetables are good for me', but to what end...

In the interaction above the teachers were in general agreement that students typically did perceive English competence associated with increased economic opportunities; specifically, working in international companies or going abroad for study or employment. However, teachers also agreed with Mark's view that generally students had a somewhat abstract notion of how English proficiency would lead to more employment opportunities. Consequently, even if students did perceive English to be a symbolic resource, it did not necessarily translate into higher levels of student engagement within academic English courses. For several of the teachers, the perception that students were unsure about "the direction of their life", as Mark stated, made it challenging at times to convince students of the need to learn academic literacy skills, an assessment that the other teachers seemed to agree with, tacitly if not explicitly.

However, one teacher pointed out that not all students were enrolled in order to learn English.

Janet: You have to accept that some of them are not motivated to learn English

T: Are not?

Janet: Yah, and do NOT want to be here and do NOT want to participate [inaudible]...that there are other reasons, whether that's parents or [inaudible]

The audio quality becomes too poor at this point to accurately transcribe. However, I was able to fill in the gaps with notes. Janet's perception, which received agreement among the other participants, was that while a significant cohort of students wished to learn English, along with academic English literacy skills, there was also a cohort of students that did not. Teachers cited other factors such as parental pressure or a lack of other viable university options in explaining the reasons that some students are enrolled in academic English courses at the university. In the view of the teachers, regardless of student perceptions of English as a symbolic resource, generally speaking students' primary goal was to pass their academic English courses and proceeding on to their degree studies.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Learning as a socially mediated process

Student talk data illustrated student perceptions that engagement, and, arguably, subsequent learning outcomes, were to a significant extent socially mediated. Communicative, socially constructed learning environments seemed to make certain academic literacy practices more accessible, which in turn also supported higher levels of student engagement in target academic English practices. One of the most salient points that student talk data emphasize was that students in the focus group perceived the teacher's role in mediating a collaborative communicative environment in which course objectives were met as highly important. Drawing on student talk data to characterize a collaborative classroom social framework that supported higher levels of student engagement, the following components were significant:

1. Class activities should involve extensive student-to-student collaboration
2. The teacher should design class activities to maximize student participation and collaboration
3. The teacher should also act as a social participant, for example, by mediating class discussion in which he or she plays an active role as interlocutor
4. Class activities should involve multi-skill competency in order to achieve greater levels of proficiency within target academic literacy practices

In the sociocultural approach, language proficiency is seen as sociolinguistic in nature; as more than the acquisition of phonological, grammatical, and even pragmatic competency. While such areas are important, the sociocultural perspective contends that “the nature of language is inextricably linked to the culturally framed and discursively patterned communicative activities of importance to our groups howsoever these groups are defined” (Hall 1997: 303). Thus the essential components of the knowledge base of language learning become the mediated means, that is, the symbolic tools and resources around which our practices are organized” (Hall 1997: 303). Luria's (in Lantolf and Pavlenko 2002: 145) characterization of language proficiency constituting a “functional organ of person” illustrates a relatively deep internalization of the sorts of sociolinguistic practices that constitute a learner's target community. Vygotsky's formulation that learning proceeds from

‘intermental to intramental’ applied to an SLA context contends that learning an L2 occurs first in social interaction, on the interpsychological plane, prior to appropriation on the cognitive, intrapsychological plane (Ohta 2000: 54).

Student talk data illustrated students’ perceptions that learning academic literacy practices crucially depended on extensive peer-to-peer social interaction and collaboration in the trajectory towards individual appropriation of such practices. For example, students reported that reading difficult academic texts was best done working together in dyads, small groups, and, where possible, elaborating discussion-based activities at the classroom level of interaction. Van Lier (2000: 253) notes that language learners working collaboratively in pairs and groups can effectively utilize affordances, which are defined as “opportunities for learning to the active, participating learner”. Furthermore Van Lier (2000: 248) suggests that learner-to-learner interaction may stimulate the negotiation of meaning making in ways that are unique from teacher-to-student interaction. Firstly, at a linguistic level of language learning, Ohta’s (2000: 75) work illustrates that learner-to-learner interaction has the potential to “promote L2 development in the ZPD” through the appropriation and collaborative transformation of an activity into a negotiation of meaning and form in which bids for help and graded scaffolding offered through peer assistance led to achieving learning outcomes. Ohta (2000: 75) concludes that more expert student guidance successfully aided a more novice learner in instances where both learners were aware that assistance could be effective.

Secondly, at a more social level of community practices, sociocultural-based research examining socialization into academic discourse communities contends that as learners gain more linguistic resources necessary to meaningfully participate in their communities, learners also come to acquire other kinds of knowledge pertaining to “ideologies, identities or subjectivities, affective orientations, linguistic and non-linguistic content [...] and practices valued by the local community”. (Ochs in Duff 2010: 173) Academic discourse (both written and spoken), states Duff (2010: 170), is not solely an object of analysis, but rather “a social, cognitive, and rhetorical process and an accomplishment, a form of enculturation, social practice, positioning, representation, and stance-taking.” Affective issues and difficulties commonly arise where newcomers lack identification and familiarity with targeted community literacy practices, especially in intercultural contexts where linguistic codes, literacy practices, and learner vs. teacher expectations are or can be at odds (Duff 2010: 176). As Morita’s (2004: 583) work illustrates, relationships within academic

discourse communities were highly significant to the positionality of newcomers and their sense of identity within their academic communities: in Morita's (2004) study, both learner-to-learner interaction and teacher-to-learner interaction were salient in the construction of viable identities as competent community members, which also had significant impact on learners' subsequent access to shared resources and, ultimately, on learning outcomes. While Morita's study was done in a university ESL context, the underlying principle that social interaction is a powerful mediating factor in students' socialization experience into target practices applies, I argue, in the present study. While the student focus group data did not explicitly breach learner positionality and the agentic construction of learner identity as community members, the data did strongly indicate that the element of teamwork went far in supporting increased engagement within academic literacy practices. Team work enabled students to surmount difficulties and collaboratively construct understanding of the texts because students could "share more ideas together than when alone" (Chuong, Student focus group). Team work and the synergy created therein could potentially scaffold the focal students' capacities to engage in academic literacy practices, and consequently, could favor the construction of positive identities as competent members within the classroom community of practice.

Finally, students shared that integrating competitive elements into class activities, and thereby creating a playful learning environment in which the whole class could potentially take part, was also effective in facilitating higher levels of student engagement. Van Lier (2008: 3) argues that collaborative engagement, at the level of the class or group in which learners speak from both an "I" and "we" perspective, as opposed to individual engagement alone, is "of a higher level in terms of classroom quality, since it would draw together the creative energies and symbolic capacities of a larger number of learners." The student focus group data suggests that a lively social dynamic facilitated higher levels of collaborative engagement, which consequently made learning academic literacy practices more enjoyable.

The teacher focus group data also illustrates that teachers perceived a collaborative social framework as being conducive to higher levels of student engagement. Initially three of the six teachers voiced that engagement was largely a factor of having a cohort of students that were intrinsically motivated, or not; a factor which could influence other students' engagement levels within a particular class. However, the talk quickly shifted towards views that student engagement was socially and contextually constructed to at least a significant extent. The articulation of such a framework differed significantly from that of the student

participants. One teacher expressed her views that student engagement was favored by the sorts of communicative and collaborative activities that involved competitive elements, or games, in which students were “physically up and active”. However, other teachers expressed reservation surrounding the use of competitive elements, or games, being integrated into class activities, questioning the usefulness of such activities in achieving learning objectives. Another teacher questioned the pedagogical stance that collaborative activities were always best suited. She argued that students should be given the choice of different ways of elaborating academic literacy events, an idea that had a lot of traction among the other teacher participants. In summary, teacher articulations did not emphasize a dynamic, communicative activity framework to the extent that student articulations did. However, that is not to say that the teachers believed that collaborative frameworks were not effective, or that they did not utilize class activities consisting of extensive student collaboration. I have observed my colleagues’ classes both in passing through the corridors and through extensive class observation. The use of a range of communicative and collaborative activity frameworks is a common organizing principle of academic English courses at the university. However, the extent to which such collaborative frameworks are used does seem to differ significantly from one teacher to another.

6.2 The role of the teacher

As discussed above, the student participants expressed their view that the teacher’s role lied in facilitating communicative and collaborative activity surrounding literacy events. However, students also felt more engaged in class activities when the teacher was a social participant. Students shared their perception that teachers should mediate lively class discussions in which the teacher also shared interesting facts, stories, cultural knowledge and, for some student participants, personal experience. Sociocultural research has focused on teacher mediation, and in particular, on different oral discursive strategies used across educational contexts. Firstly, Anton’s (1999: 313-14) study illustrates how a dialogic foreign language teacher was able to effectively scaffold learner production of their L2 through a range of discourse strategies such as “directives, assisting questions, repetition, and nonverbal devices”. Dialogical discursive strategies in Anton’s study led learners to actively engage with the teacher in the negotiation of form, meaning and classroom community norms of interaction. Furthermore, Lantolf and Genung (2002: 176) and Hall (1995: 49) illustrate that

the power a teacher has in establishing interactional norms within the classroom community of practice is highly significant in terms of facilitating, or impoverishing, learner engagement within class practices. In these studies the teachers' strict adherence to set agendas and pedagogical stances prevented students from engaging in meaningful conversation. Hall (1995: 57) observes that classroom discourse patterns sanctioned by the teacher can limit opportunities for increasingly complex exchanges in dealing with discussion topics, thus constraining learners' interactional development in the L2, including familiarity with and competency in interactional norms of the classroom community.

Duff (2010: 176) reports that not all programs, instructors and activities are equally "effective socializing agents" in introducing learners to academic discourse communities, especially in intercultural contexts where there exist divergent literacy and linguistic backgrounds, as well as distinct frameworks of expectations surrounding membership roles, as well as perceived rights and responsibilities within learning communities. The most effective instructors, materials and programs are those that "make explicit the values and practices implicit in the culture and provide novices with the language, skills, support, and opportunities they need to participate with growing competence in the new culture and its core activities." (Duff 2010: 176) The focus group data in my study illustrated that students valued a dialogic teacher who was willing to extensively engage in talk on a range of topics. Students felt that rich classroom interaction facilitated learning outcomes through familiarizing students with curricular topics, which seemed to also aid students in academic reading and writing practices. Finally, students expressed that through the willingness to socially engage, a teacher showed the he or she was invested in the learning environment, as opposed to being on the sidelines as a mere facilitator of activities. My impression in listening to student accounts was that such willingness seemed to signify to students that teachers were more invested in creating a higher quality learning environment, which in turn seemed to be a significant factor in bringing about higher levels of student engagement.

Finally, student engagement was also linked to the teacher's role as expert in SLA. Student perceptions illustrated that teachers were expected to facilitate the acquisition of language and academic literacy skills through class instruction and individualized teacher interventions. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1995: 620) state in looking at assisted performance in the ZPD that "determining a learner's ZPD is an act of negotiated discovery that is realized through dialogic interaction between learner and expert." The help negotiated between the expert and novice is "contingent in the sense that it moves from more explicit to more

implicit, or strategic, levels.” (ibid) Student talk data in my study linked strategic and individualized teacher interventions to facilitating higher levels of student engagement. This was particularly clear in the case of academic writing. Students reported that written feedback, including correction codes and formative feedback addressing content, was very important, as was social interaction with the teacher in the form of teacher-student conferencing. The latter, according to student perceptions, was seen as highly effective in diagnosing certain linguistic and literacy-related problems and then helping students to formulate corrective strategies.

Similar to student perceptions, the teacher focus group data illustrates that teachers perceived their role as very significant to enhancing student engagement. One particularly impactful contribution came from a teacher who argued that the single most important factor in accounting for student engagement was the presence of a teacher not impoverishing it; that when a teacher treated “students like humans” and really listened to students, as opposed to telling them “to [re]produce sounds in English”, students felt an authenticity in the interactions that would arise in such a classroom (Mark, Teacher focus group). Another teacher narrative illustrated how publicly encountering resistance created an honest and permissive atmosphere, allowing for resolution. Such talk interactions had significant resonance among all teacher focus group participants. I got the sense that teachers valued the element of authentic human interaction with students as going a long way in bringing about a collaborative classroom social framework. Such perceptions were very much in line with student perceptions and expectations. However, teacher talk data did not address the need for teacher-student conferencing, which was a predominant sub theme in the student talk data.

6.3 The use of authentic, outside materials

Students expressed that authentic, outside materials that were congruous with course content objectives provided a significant basis on which a collaborative social framework could be constructed. Students complained that the course book materials risked being “boring” or too difficult to comprehend at times, while authentic outside materials provided superior vocabulary learning opportunities and were, generally speaking, more interesting. Duff’s (2004: 232) longitudinal study looked at how the use of popular cultural texts in class discussions of a Canadian grade 10 Social Studies class created an intertextual and discursive hybridity of classroom talk in which socialization into academic discourse occurred within

the juxtaposition of popular culture discussion. Gutierrez et al. (in Duff 2004: 236), studying heteroglossia and multivocality in classroom talk, first posited the existence of an unscripted “third space”, as apart from the two typical forms of class talk: (1) the “teacher script”, or formal, academic talk, and (2) the “student script”, or the vernacular forms of talk. The third space was characterized as an intersection of the official and unofficial codes which, according to Gutierrez et al. (ibid), afforded students the opportunity for a new sense of “knowledge and knowledge representation” through the integration of students’ interests and experience into classroom discussion. The authors contended that a greater awareness of discourse and participatory roles arose through the exploration of these non-official cognitive, affective, sociocultural spaces which essentially integrated areas of pop culture into academic topics covered in classroom discussion. Duff’s (2010: 243) study illustrates that where student participants within the classroom community shared a repertoire of cultural knowledge consisting of popular culture icons and/or awareness of current events, discursive socialization took place surrounding language use, media literacy, and the efficacy of integrating outside sources into classroom discussion. Duff (2010: 244) concludes that “references to pop culture and related sources provided connections to the contemporary cultural worlds and multiple curricular and extracurricular literacies of the students”. Specifically, the hybrid forms of discourse consisting of academic and non-academic sources observed in the study contributed to the affective, cognitive and linguistic engagement of local students and served as a powerful resource in the performance of student social and cultural identities. The focal students in this thesis expressed in very clear terms their desire for the use of authentic, outside materials in meeting course objectives. Further study is needed in order to better understand student perceptions surrounding the linguistic and sociocultural significance outside materials potentially offer academic English learning contexts for Vietnamese learners studying academic English.

In terms of class materials, the teacher focus group differed somewhat from the student focus group in that teachers did not discuss the centrality of course materials. Only one teacher shared her view that class materials ought to align with students’ perceptions of relevance and interest; however, there was no mention of utilizing authentic outside materials, a topic of which the students had strong feelings about. However, this is not to say that teachers did not see the importance of using authentic outside materials in order to supplement the academic English curricula. In my experience in the department, many teachers do, in fact, integrate a

range of authentic outside materials to supplement the course books. As stated previously, this area remains as a potential site of future research.

6.4 Student perceptions surrounding learning outcomes

One of the more salient areas of teacher discussion dealt with student perceptions of targeted learning outcomes. Teachers argued that when students perceived an immediate and practical “take-away, or outcome of the activity, they were more engaged in class practices and activities. Exam preparation in particular, according to teachers, elicited high levels of student engagement, as did more “traditional” language learning activities, such as vocabulary and grammar gap-fill exercises. Student talk data also indicated high levels of engagement when class activities were centered around exam preparation. Thus, this was one significant area in which teacher and student perceptions were in alignment: students were more engaged when preparing for exams. On the other hand, according to the teachers, the relatively more longer-term oriented academic literacy practices, for example, annotating reading texts or writing summary and responses (RJ), were seen as “a harder sale”. Student perceptions, on the other hand, did not explicitly articulate resistance to the same longer-term oriented academic literacy practices, per se. Students did often emphasize the goal of passing their academic English courses. However, they also expressed that they saw value in the longer-term oriented academic literacy practices but that such practices often times felt very difficult, and hence, that collaborative activity frameworks were very significant in helping students surmount difficulties encountered in certain literacy practices.

6.5 Learner history

Various scholars working within the sociocultural framework hold that learner engagement is, to at least some extent, historically constructed (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001; Thorne 2005). Participation in the social and cultural-material environments, and especially in the formative years of childhood, constitute one’s habitus (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146), which is defined as “a set of socially and interactionally derived generative dispositions that enable and constrain agency” (Thorne 2005: 405). In this view, habitus is not deterministic; but rather represents an ongoing development and is subject to change since “human agents are capable (given the right circumstances) of critically analyzing the discourses which frame their lives” (Burr in Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 146). The focus group data illustrate

somewhat divergent perceptions among the students and teachers surrounding what significance students' learner history plays in student engagement in academic English classroom practices. For the focal students, their experience of learning English in high school was characterized as "so boring" (Student focus group). I did not go into great depth in exploring student perceptions of the kinds of English language activities that went on in the high schools they had attended. However, students clearly articulated that a significant reason why they perceived that collaborating in dyads, small groups and as a whole class as more enjoyable and pedagogically effective for learning academic English was due to their negative perceptions of language teaching and learning methodologies they experienced as high school students.

Teachers, on the other hand, saw students' learning histories in high school as conducive to students' preferences for more "traditional" language learning activities; for example vocabulary, grammar-based gap-fill activities and dictation exercises. Furthermore, teachers linked students' academic socialization experiences in high school as a factor in explaining less student engagement in, and, frequently, resistance to, certain academic literacy practices center-staged in the academic English program: teachers identified the practices of lecture-style note taking, annotating reading texts, and summarizing and responding to reading texts in response journals (RJ) as producing significant levels of resistance among students. The focal students, for their part, did acknowledge that they had not gained exposure to certain academic literacy practices in high school and, consequently, characterized certain academic literacy practices as very difficult. The students mentioned the skills of lecture-style listening and note taking practices, reading difficult texts, and summarizing and responding to them in their response journals as challenging literacy activities. However, while the teachers shared their views that students "hated" the response journal, the student participants in this study shared a different view. As stated previously, students stated that they found it a difficult ongoing project; however, students also stated that they did find the response journal useful and especially when approaching it collaboratively during class time and working together in small groups.

6.6 Perceptions of English as a symbolic resource

Finally, student-teacher perceptions of English as a symbolic resource, and the interplay that such perceptions had in influencing student engagement in their academic English courses,

represent a salient part of the focus group data. It is significant to note that the official language of the international university in which this study was carried out is English: all administrative forms that students fill out are in English. Furthermore, students are encouraged to use English when interacting with peers, both inside and outside of class, as well as when conversing with all university staff, whether they be Vietnamese or from other countries. Plaques are located throughout the university campus encouraging students to speak English. The university, in this manner, attempts to create an immersive setting in which students develop their English “in an international environment that can prepare them to work anywhere in the world” (University website). Although in practice, in my experience, students commonly use Vietnamese on campus, English, as the official medium, receives a certain institutional status and prestige. Bourdieu’s (1977: 651) view of language as a “symbolic resource” sees language as transcending the mere access to linguistic resources, but rather also encompassing also modes of thought, knowledge, credentials and other forms of resources associated with socio-economic status. As Vietnam continues along the path of economic liberalization and as a destination of foreign direct investment, English language competency is increasingly valued as a symbolic resource.

A significant body of SLA research illustrates that language learners very often have conceptualizations of the institutional, cultural and social community contexts that they wish to access as a result of learning a target language. Various SLA scholars have drawn on Lave and Wenger’s idea of ‘imagined community’, which is the notion that salient community affiliations can often times be imaginary or aspirational in nature. Norton and Toohey (2008: 678) argue that learner’s imagined communities must be taken into account in the language learning classroom if students are to engage in class practices and attain learning outcomes. Drawing on Bourdieu’s metaphor of capital, Norton and Toohey’s (2011: 420) work on language learner identity posits that learners *invest* in learning a second language with the understanding that they are acquiring a form of “cultural capital” that in turn can provide access to other forms of capital, both material and symbolic. Thus, for Norton, learner investment in a second language is tantamount to learners investing in social identities, as well as gaining access to learners’ aspired-for imagined communities.

The student focus group illustrated perceptions that English proficiency was seen as a symbolic resource. All five students articulated that learning English was significant to achieving their professional goals, ultimately providing greater access to social and economic opportunities in the future. Furthermore, such perceptions seemed linked to student

engagement within their academic English courses: students expressed their priority of, first and foremost, passing their academic English courses in order to progress to their degree program of choice and eventually to other academic or professional opportunities both within Vietnam and abroad. Four students spoke of either working in Vietnam within multinational companies or of eventually going abroad for work and/or study opportunities. However, the students often emphasized that their academic English courses did not need to directly relate to their career goals, *per se*, but, rather, academic English courses were seen more as a gateway into degree studies. In terms of students engaging in their academic English courses with the awareness of constructing more desirable social identities, the talk data is suggestive of the imagined community construct cited in language learner identity research. Gao, Cheng and Kelly (2008) conclude in their ethnographic study of postgraduate university English learners in Hong Kong participating in an English club that attendance seemed to provide participants access to an emergent (imagined) community of modern, educated, and multilingual Chinese speakers of English, in distinction to monolingual Chinese. Gao et al. maintain that the club served as an important site of socialization and identity construction. In the present study, student descriptions of their career goals were succinct (“I want to be a businessman”; “I want to sign contract with foreigners”) though suggestive of a similar representation of a young, modern, emergent community of multilingual Vietnamese. However, such conclusions should be taken lightly due to the relatively small volume of talk data collected for this study. At one point, when I asked students whether they felt they had a new sense of identity as they arrived at higher levels of English language proficiency, one student participant concurred. She explained that speaking English allowed her to communicate with her Korean friends, as well as having made possible a day of shopping in Singapore when she was there on holidays. Her perceptions could certainly be seen as a sense of emergent social identity in connection to her ability to converse and to function with English as the medium of communication.

The teacher focus group largely coincided with student perceptions. Teachers reported that, in their views, most students perceived English proficiency as a symbolic resource. However, teachers also expressed that most students still had not decided on their career path, or were still too young to have had a very developed sense of social identity rooted in a professional orientation. Teachers also shared that in their experience students linked English proficiency to working in multinational companies inside Vietnam and abroad, as well as to accessing educational opportunities abroad. Thus, in summary, while the teacher participants

linked student engagement to student perceptions of English as a symbolic resource, the teachers perceived a very tenuous link between student engagement, specifically, and the construction of social identity.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this chapter I will touch briefly on the key findings of this thesis as discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter. I will also address the contributions this thesis makes in terms of both theoretical and practical considerations. Finally, I comment on some of the limitations of the present study and then proceed to make recommendations surrounding future research directions.

7.1 Engagement as interactionally co-constructed

In line with the data presented in Chapter 4, and followed by the discussion of the data in Chapter 5, the findings for the student focus group support the first half of my hypothesis for Research Question 1: student engagement in Academic English classroom practices at an international university in Vietnam is contingent to a significant degree on what Lantolf and Genung (2002: 176) call the “quality of the social framework in which target academic practices are carried out.” Namely, the focal students articulated that they were most engaged in their academic English classroom practices when such practices were embedded within collaborative, communicative frameworks involving peer-to-peer teamwork. Furthermore, the focal students articulated their views that a teacher should be both facilitator and social participant in classroom activities. In summary, my hypothesis that engagement is fundamentally co-constructed through social interaction within activity frameworks seems to be supported by the student focus group data. However, regarding the second part of my hypothesis for Research Question 1, that student engagement in classroom practices is significantly contingent on student perceptions surrounding the role of English as a symbolic resource, the data does not support this assertion. While the focal students did express a range of perceptions indicating that they did perceive the English language to be instrumental in attaining future socio-economic opportunities, the data did not strongly link such perceptions to engagement within classroom practices.

In terms of Research Question 2 regarding how teachers articulate student engagement, the teacher focus group data illustrates that teacher notions of students as either being ‘motivated’ or not, with ‘motivation’ being seen as a learner trait, were present, however, not to the extent that I had anticipated. In other words, teachers did initially attribute higher

levels of student engagement to students being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. However, the teacher participants also attributed student engagement to students' perceptions that class activities could deliver learning outcomes; especially, where students perceived that activities would help them pass their academic English course assessments. The focal teachers also held the view that the nature of how classroom practices were negotiated with students was also significant in accounting for learner engagement. Specifically, the data suggests that the focal teachers viewed social relationships and collaborative peer-to-peer interaction as significant in facilitating higher levels of student engagement. The second part of my hypothesis for Research Question 2 postulated that teachers would attribute higher levels of engagement in cases in which students perceived the English language to be of symbolic value in accessing future social and economic opportunities. However, the data in this thesis does not support this assertion. In other words, the focal teachers did not clearly support the contention that students would be more engaged in classroom practices due to their perceptions that English language proficiency would increase their levels of symbolic capital.

7.2 Limitations of the study

One fundamental limitation of the study is the relatively small amount of data collected. Morgan (1997: 13) contends that focus groups can serve as either a stand-alone study or as a supplementary means of data collection. Should the focus group serve as the primary means of data collection, Morgan advises carrying out three separate focus group interviews comprised of individuals representing the same targeted cohort in order to arrive at more conclusive understandings of perceptions prevalent within the given cohort. However, Talmy's (2010) discursive view of the interview in qualitative research, in examining both "the assembly process" as well as "what is assembled" (Holstein and Gubrium 2003 in Talmy 2010: 4), does not explicitly place a particular number on the amount of interviews necessary in the process of data collection. Indeed, in Talmy's (2010) study, a relatively small amount of data is utilized in illustrating the discursive nature in which identity categories had been jointly co-constructed by the interviewer and student participants. In this study, while carrying out the focus groups and subsequently analyzing the talk data, I had the distinct feeling that a lot of different topics were being covered although not always in the depth that I would have liked. Owing to my relative lack of experience in carrying out research

interviews, I noticed at times that I did not go into very much depth on certain topics, or that I prematurely stopped participants from elaborating on their perceptions because I felt (in the moment) that the talk was somehow digressing from the most crucial areas of discussion. Due to the fact that the focus group interviews had to be kept relatively short (approximately an hour in length), perhaps I could have opted to limit the areas of focus in order to have gotten more in-depth data surrounding a narrower scope of topics. However, it is also true that the study was intended to be exploratory in nature, and thus, the range of topics covered can serve as a good starting point for carrying out future research.

7.3 Contributions of the study to the field: theory and practice

One strength of the study is that it contributes to the growing body of research that emphasizes learners' voices, and, in this case, the voices of Vietnamese learners of academic English in an international university setting in Vietnam. Firstly, studies that take into account learner voices are particularly valuable in academic socialization studies in multicultural and multilingual, English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) contexts. Academic socialization studies have increasingly emphasized the voices of multicultural student cohorts, representing diverse linguistic traditions, literacy practices, and cultural identities, as highly significant in explaining learners' experiences. Increasingly importance is being given to learner identity construction as members within their communities in accounting for the socially situated nature of learning outcomes (Duff 2002; Duff 2010; Leki 2006; McKay and Wong 1996; Morita 2004). Clearly the transition into Western academic literacy practices for student cohorts that are unfamiliar with such practices, and coming from fundamentally diverse academic and literacy traditions, can be fraught with difficulties as students come to grips with what it means to be active participants within their academic communities. Social contextual factors clearly matter in terms of explaining learner agency and learning outcomes. As academic socialization studies have illustrated, certain programs, curricula, class practices, and teachers, are more effective than others at facilitating student socialization into target academic practices and more fuller participation (Duff 2010; Morita 2004). The present study is significant due to the fact that there is a dearth of SLA research focusing on learning contexts within Vietnam, and, in particular, there is a lack of studies looking at academic English learning in university contexts in Vietnam. Harklau (2011: 175), in commenting on qualitative trends within the

field of SLA from 2003 to 2011, notes that over 70 studies examining second language learning in university contexts had been identified in publications including *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Modern Language Journal*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. However, to my knowledge, not a single study exists looking at the socially mediated nature of learner engagement in an academic English context at an international university in Vietnam.

The findings of this thesis, thus, contribute to the growing body of sociocultural-based research examining learner and teacher perspectives surrounding learner engagement within their academic communities. The findings support the contention in more social lines of research within SLA that learner engagement within class practices is mediated in profound ways through social relationships and norms of interaction sanctioned within classroom activity. The findings strongly indicate that both peer-to-peer interaction and teacher-to-learner(s) interaction play significant roles in mediating learners' engagement, which, I believe is deeply influential in the subsequent appropriation of target academic literacy practices.

On a practical level, academic teaching staff can focus on developing activity frameworks within classroom contexts that favor teamwork and authentic dialogic interaction in the when focusing on academic literacy practices. Firstly, academic literacy events or tasks, where possible, can be embedded within collaborative, communicative frameworks allowing dyads, triads, and small groups of students to interact. Such interaction potentially provides students the opportunity to better leverage a variety of linguistic and knowledge-based resources. As illustrated in the findings, the pooling of resources has the potential for synergy, thus allowing students to collaboratively overcome learning barriers which is very salient where learners are struggling to appropriate academic literacy practices. Tasks, or activities, should be adequately structured so as to maximize participation and facilitate equal responsibility among team members. This requires extensive planning and creativity on the part of teachers, as well as continuous observation during the elaboration of activities carried out in real time. As Ohta (2000: 73) notes, the instantiation of pedagogical activities by learners often occurs in ways that are difficult to predict and unintended by the very curriculum writers who designed the activities. Thus, the efficacy of a task cannot be assumed. In fact, the same activity will most likely be carried out in different ways among different learners, or carried out in different ways even among the same learners but at different times and under different

conditions. Thus, class activities, and especially those surrounding target literacy practices, can and should be continuously examined, modified and enhanced as needed.

Secondly, teaching staff should engage within their classrooms as both expert and social participant. The teacher's role in establishing collaborative social frameworks in which practices are carried out is crucially important. As Duff (2010: 176) points out, in intercultural contexts different frameworks of expectations and divergent understandings of responsibilities surrounding student and teacher roles can be, and often are, significant sources of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Especially where institutional roles of power favor the teacher as the knowledge authority, as well as the one who sanctions certain interactional practices over others, the teacher's role in establishing quality activity frameworks is crucial. Students risk, and especially in intercultural communicative contexts where misunderstanding often goes unidentified, being positioned in profound manners which subsequently shape future participation in class practices, as well as determining to a great extent student access to essential linguistic and knowledge related resources. Consequently, those teachers that deliberately and methodically make the implicit roles and responsibilities of target practices explicit to student participants may mediate greater levels of student engagement (Duff 2010: 176). As the growing body of sociocultural research has indicated, dialogically oriented teaching styles can enhance both the negotiation of meaning and form at the level of language, as well as the negotiation of roles, rights and responsibilities pertaining to community participation (Hall 1995; Anton 2000).

Finally, teaching staff should find practical mediums of intervention that address individual student difficulties related to literacy practices. The student data is suggestive that individual teacher-student interaction is significant in helping students become more proficient practitioners within target practices, which subsequently improves student engagement. Sociocultural research has illustrated that a learner's zone of proximal development is dialogically engaged where both the expert and learner are aware of the concrete areas in which assisted learning is required (Ohta 2000: 76; Lantolf and Aljaafreh 1995: 620).

7.4 Future directions

Sociocultural based research in the field of SLA has increasingly documented how peer-to-peer interaction has the potential to scaffold language learning outcomes where learners are

aware that such scaffolding is necessary or beneficial (Ohta 2000: 76). Furthermore, studies looking at monological versus dialogical teacher discourse strategies indicate that the latter has the potential to lead to deeper negotiation of meaning through authentic and more meaningful talk in class through both peer-to-peer interaction as well as teacher-student interaction (Hall 1995: 49; Anton 2000: 314). As van Lier (2008: 253) states, learners utilize affordances both in interacting with peers or in interacting with experts, however, the nature of how those affordances are used is not the same, which is to say both forms of interaction (student-to-student and teacher-to-student(s)) has the potential to offer active and agentive learners unique learning opportunities. Finally, sociocultural-based research examining academic socialization in university contexts have largely followed longitudinal ethnographic research methodologies, relying on student interview data and on student self-reporting. Thus, further research of university English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in Vietnam could examine the interactional co-construction of affordances situated within target academic literacy practices. Utilizing conversation analysis (CA), combined with student interviews and teacher and student self-reporting, may shed light on (1) how affordances are interactionally achieved within targeted literacy events or tasks, and (2) the relationship between the local co-construction of affordances, on the one hand, and participant perceptions of engagement, on the other hand. Such research could examine both student-to-student and teacher-to-student(s) interaction.

7.5 Concluding remarks

The socially oriented theories and perspectives discussed in this thesis offer a significant dimension to the understanding of language learning *and* language use as social praxis. Long's (1997) contention that sociolinguistic and more socially-oriented schools of thought within SLA had, to date, not contributed to an understanding of how languages are acquired ignores the fact that language learning, too, is a sort of social praxis. Looking ahead, sociocultural theory is especially suited to contributing to a more robust and theoretically encompassing field of SLA. In commenting on the potential sociocultural theory has within the field of SLA, Thorne (2005: 394) notes "the goal of [such] research is to understand the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional setting, on the other". To this end, sociocultural theory offers a comprehensive approach in its theoretical underpinning that seeks to join the dimensions of the cognitive

with the social aspects involved in language acquisition. Finally, sociocultural theory is especially suited in contexts of cultural diversity due to the fact that it places emphasis on using research processes and findings to enact positive transformation in problem situations (Engestrom, Engestrom, and Kerosuo 2003 in Thorne 2005: 394). Vygotsky advocated for social justice through the institution of education. Vygotsky viewed the institution of education as a potentially impactful form of intervention for the transformation of society through the transformation of everyday mundane practices within cultural institutions. Such a philosophical basis is especially suited for an international university setting where the nature of social interaction is seen as crucial for the construction of high quality learning environments.

In continuing with the line of socially-oriented research that seeks to emphasize student voices within the field of SLA, this thesis has attempted to characterize the social and contextually mediated nature of student engagement in an international university setting in Vietnam. In recognizing that our communities are grounded on those activities and practices that bring together its participants, I hope this thesis will contribute to the growing body of literature that invites introspection into the mundane and seemingly transparent activities that constitute our teaching and learning environments. Examination of and inquiry into the seemingly ordinary activities that frame classroom practices have, perhaps, the most potential for better understanding our roles and responsibilities as community members, collaborators, and authors of our negotiated spaces of learning and self-expression. As Thorne (2007) points out, if education is to have its intended emancipatory effect, participants must be free to utilize agency for the creative enactment of more satisfying identities. I believe that social theories of language learning provide robust frameworks to better understand and appreciate those social relationships that characterize our learning environments. Such an awareness ultimately allows for more equitable, interesting and productive language learning environments.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (STUDENT FOCUS GROUP)

(Give a brief introduction in which the scope of the study is discussed; clarify the term ‘motivation’ and willingness to participate in classroom activities.)

1. In an academic English class what kinds of activities make you feel that you enjoy learning?
2. What kind of teachers, or teaching styles, make you feel more motivated in an academic English class?
3. Think of a time you had a teacher in an academic English class that made you feel very unmotivated. What did that teacher do or not do in his or her class?
4. Have you ever had an academic English instructor who was very effective at teaching you how to write?
5. Of the four academic skills taught in academic English courses – reading, writing, speaking and listening – which skill is most important for you and why?
6. Is it important that a teacher show kindness, or respect, in an academic English course? How does showing respect affect motivation in participating in class activities?
7. Do you feel that your social identity changes as you become a more fluent and skilful speaker of English? If so, explain how?
8. How does becoming a more skilful speaker of English affect your future career and/or study goals.
9. Are you more motivated if academic English classes involve your future career goals?
10. Generally speaking, do you prefer group work activities, individual activities, or a mix of the two? Why?
11. What kinds of lessons or activities in academic English class do you feel most motivated?
 - Reading lesson
 - Writing lesson
 - Vocabulary
 - Class based discussions on select topics
 - Listening to lectures and note taking
 - Response journal (RJ)

(each student participant will be instructed to elaborate on a story in which he or she felt particularly engaged in his or her chosen activity.)

12. What kind of teacher help do you find most useful? Why?

13. Think of the actions of a very good student? What do they do in class? Do you do that? Why (not)?

14. What does a good student do when they are unmotivated?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (TEACHER FOCUS GROUP)

(Emphasize that data collection is perception and experience-based; that telling stories is good).

1. In an academic English class context, when do you find that students are most willing to be engaged in classroom activities?
2. To what extent do you feel that a student being motivated, or not, leads to higher levels of engagement in classroom activities?
3. To what extent do you think that different classroom dynamics of interaction, for example, collaborative group work versus individual tasks, affect student engagement in classroom activities?
4. Elaborate on a time when an activity you proposed met resistance on the part of students. Why do you feel that students resisted?
5. In your perception, what does student engagement in classroom activities look like?
6. To what extent do you see student social identity shaping engagement in classroom activities?
7. In your experience, what do you think motivates students to learn academic English?
8. To what extent do you think that students perceive proficiency in the English language to hold symbolic or cultural value?
9. To what extent do you feel that students associate learning academic English with gaining access to more professional or social opportunities in the future?
10. In your experience, which classroom activities result in the highest levels of student engagement? Why?
 - Reading lesson
 - Writing lesson
 - Vocabulary
 - Class based discussions on select topics
 - Listening to lectures and note taking
 - Response journal (RJ)

**STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

You are asked to participate in a research study done by Trevor Edmunds, for an MA in General Linguistics, in the Department of General Linguistics at Stellenbosch University. As the study forms part of a research project for degree-seeking purposes, the results will be published in a thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because the study requires Vietnamese students of academic English at RMIT.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate the ways that students of academic English at RMIT talk about their willingness to engage in academic English courses.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will ask you to take part in a focus group/small group interview.

Interviews and discussions will be audio recorded. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to these recordings. Participants will be granted an opportunity to verify the contents of the audio tapes and transcribed notes.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND TO SOCIETY

By participating in this study you will be given the opportunity to anonymously share your views on what kinds of academic English class dynamics lead to higher or lower degrees of motivation.

The findings of the study could possibly be used to inform best teaching practices within the Academic English Department at RMIT.

All participants will have access to the findings of the study.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The participants will not experience or be exposed to any potential risks or discomfort by participating in this study. All information will remain strictly confidential.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants will not receive payment for participation in the study.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The data will be stored in hard copy form as well as electronically, but only the researcher and his supervisors will have access to the data.

No names of any participants will be mentioned – pseudonyms will be used, which will not allow anyone except the researcher to determine the identity of a participant. Data will be used qualitative data analysis and discussion.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain as a participant in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Trevor Edmunds, principal investigator, or Prof. Manne Bylund, supervisor.

Trevor Edmunds:

trevor.edmunds@rmit.edu.vn

Manne Bylund:

manne.bylund@biling.su.se

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché (mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622) at the Division for Research Development.

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE
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The information above was described to me by Trevor Edmunds in English and I have understood this consent form or the contents have been satisfactorily translated. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject/Participant

Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____ [*name of the participant*]. [He/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English.

Signature of Investigator

Date